

Tales  
of the Sacred  
and the  
Supernatural



Mircea Eliade

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BY  
MIRCEA ELIADE

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LES TROIS GRACES

Translated by Mac Linscott Ricketts

WITH THE GYPSY GIRLS

Translated by William Ames Coates

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## FOREWORD LITERATURE AND FANTASY

THAT which characterizes us as human and defines us vis-a-vis other orders of nature and God is the instinct for transcendence, the craving to be freed from oneself and to pass over into the other, the urgent need to break the iron band of individuality. Dream, the safety valve of this thirst for transcendence, as well as art, magic, dance, and love and mysticism-these all testify from various angles to the fundamental and fated instinct of human nature for emergence from oneself and fusion with the other, for a flight from limited solitariness and a bounding toward perfect freedom in the freedom of the other.

It seems to me that art is nothing other than a magical transcendence of the object, its projection into another dimension, its liberation through magical realization and creativity. This dimension is difficult to specify, but the intuition of it provokes what is called an aesthetic thrill, which is really nothing but a magical joy at the victorious bursting of the iron band.

It is, I say, the joy felt by the one who contemplates it over the fact that someone else, the artist, has succeeded in circumventing human fate, has succeeded in creating. It is the religious thrill of the creature, but with this difference: while the creature-feeling which we experience in any religious thrill reveals our dependence on God as one of God's creatures, in the case of the artistic thrill the predominant sentiment is something else: the joy that a human being has created, has imitated God's work, has been saved from a destined sterility, has breached those walls of impotence and finitude. On the one hand there is the formula "I am created by God, " which inevitably arouses the consciousness of nothingness, of religious fear, of the taste of dust and ashes. On the other hand there is the statement "A human being, like myself, has created, like God, " which brings the joy that a fellow creature has imitated creation, has become a demiurge, a force in the creating. That is why one finds so often the spirit of magic in a work of art: it is a projection, through the will and the genius, both magical in nature, of the inner world, the drama of individuality, in a dimension little accessible to the everyday consciousness, but realized and experienced through the artistic act. ...

The tragic fate, which only a few realize in all its depths, of not being able to get out of yourself except by losing yourself, of not being able to communicate soul to soul (because any communication is illusory, except for love, which is a communion), of remaining terrified and alone in a world which in appearance is so osmotic, so intimate-that tragic fate can only incite an unwearying struggle

against itself, an immensely varied combat in opposition to its laws. Hence the magical, artistic impulse of genius which cries that the law is for others, while play and fantasy are for the demon in us, for the artist and the dreamer. We are conditioned by creation and are ourselves created. But that creative and self-revealing instinct transcends creation. We create! We ignore the law and are beyond good and evil. We create through play, and we realize that dimension of dream wherein we enjoy absolute freedom, where the categories of existence are ignored and fate is suppressed. Any revolt against the laws of fate must have the character of play, of the divine ....

The magical structure of play and fantasy is obvious. In its "leap " it creates a new space with a centrifugal motion, in the center of which stands, as it were, the demiurge, the creative force of a new cosmos. From it, from this actualization of primordality, everything begins. This leap outside indicates the beginning of a new world. It matters little that this world will find its own new laws quickly, laws over which new others will be unable to pass. It remains a magical, demiurgical creation, just as a work of art is a creation even if, when completed, it falls under the domination of physical, social, economic, or artistic laws.

Since the body of my contributions to the literature of fantasy, my litterature fantastique, is available in German, French, Spanish, and other languages, but only fragmentarily accessible to the English reader, I would like to say a few words about it here in addition to the above remarks on creativity which I first set down in my Soliloquies in 1932. \* In the two novelettes which constitute Tales of the Occult, among the earliest of my fictional works to appear also in English (1940, and again in 1970), I wanted to relate certain yogic techniques and particularly yogic folklore to a series of events narrated in the literary genre of the mystery story. In both tales a number of important characters were actually real persons: Dr. J. M. Honigberger, still remembered today for his Thirty-five Years in the East (1852); John van Manen, the Tibetan scholar; the learned Islamicist Lucian Bogdanof, whom I knew well in Calcutta in 1930-31; and Swami Shivananda, whom I lived near during the six months of my stay in a Himalayan ashram at Rishi Kesh. In addition to these factual references, however, throughout the stories I also carefully introduced a number of imaginary details intended to awaken suspicions in the cautious reader about the authenticity of the yogic "secrets" described. For instance, at a certain moment the life of Dr. Honigberger is radically mythologized, as a glance at any of his biographies

\*soliloquii (Bucharest: Colectia "Carte cu Semne," 1932), pp. 47-50, translated here by Mac Linscott Ricketts.

will show. Likewise, the region around Serampore, where some of the events take



place, is described in such a way as to reveal its status as mythical geography.

The same is true of some of the yogic techniques depicted: some correspond to real experiences, but others reflect more directly descriptions given in yogic folklore. This melange of reality and fiction is admirably suited to my central conception as a writer of "camouflage" as a dialectical moment, and in this connection I wish to say once again that any hierophany is a revelation of the

sacred hidden in a profane object. In *Tales of the Occult*, I used this camouflage in a basically paradoxical manner, for the reader had no means available within the stories to decide whether the reality was hidden in the fiction or the fiction in the reality, both processes being deliberately intermingled.

In these earlier stories I knowingly utilized a number of literary clichés, for my ambition was to follow as closely as possible the popular models of the genre while introducing into the narrative the dialectic of camouflage. But neither of these earlier works, though typically my own, is fully representative of my literature fantastique. In my other stories in the fantastic vein I have set the dialectic of camouflage different tasks, though it would be pointless to give examples here, since it is almost impossible to analyze stylistically the various types of fantastic tales within the confines of a simple resume. In fact, I even doubt whether such tales can really be summarized, their literary qualities and their mystery residing precisely in the experienced texture of the narrative, as is so clearly the case in

"The Three Graces" published here. I can only say that, besides employing different stylistic approaches in succeeding stories, I have repeatedly taken up the themes of *sortie du temps*, or temporal dislocation, and of the alteration or the transmutation of space. Another favorite technique of mine aims at the imperceptibly gradual transmutation of a commonplace setting into a new "world" without, however, losing the proper, everyday, or "natural" structure and qualities of that setting. In my short novel *Sarpele* (*The Serpent*), written and published in 1937, a rather ordinary picnic in the vicinity of a monastery is transformed unwittingly into a strange ritual after the unexpected appearance of a snake. But the fantastic atmosphere unfolds almost "naturally," and not a single supernatural element intervenes to destroy the familiar world of a depressingly banal group of townspeople enjoying their picnic. The "parallel world" of the fantastic is indistinguishable from the given, ordinary world, but once this other world is discovered by the various characters, it blurs, changes, transforms, or dislocates their lives in different ways.

In "With the Gypsy Girls" a mediocre, absentminded piano teacher pauses by chance one very hot afternoon in front of a curious house, where, upon meeting a young girl, he is lured into seeing "the gypsies." A series of strange incidents and rather childish games follow; but when, a few hours later, the piano teacher leaves the house he gradually discovers that something is wrong—the town, his house, and his acquaintances have all changed. He is told—but he does not believe—that twelve years have passed while he was involved in the innocent, almost meaningless adventures in the house of "the gypsies."

In a somewhat similar way, The Old Man and the Bureaucrats (1979) relates the tale of the intrusion of the bizarre personal memories of an old man on the official bureaucratic world. In this story the style becomes a counterpoint to the narrative which depicts the encounter of two different, antagonistic, and yet finally identical mythological worlds. In an attempt to explain himself to the city police, the old man, Farama, becomes involved in writing out a long, rambling, and hopelessly labyrinthian history of his earlier experiences and memories as headmaster of the primary school in Strada Mantuleasa—an account that seems to the officials to be more legend and folklore than history. In the frustrating process of interrogation the two worlds gradually impinge and merge, and the bureaucratic world begins to function fantastically. In all of these more recent stories, the "fantastic" elements disclose—or, more precisely, create—a series of "parallel worlds" which do not pretend to be "symbols" of something else. Thus it is fruitless to read into the events and characters of the stories a hidden meaning that may illuminate certain aspects of immediate reality. Each tale creates its own proper universe, and the creation of such imaginary universes through literary means can be compared with mythical processes. For any myth relates a story or tale of a creation, tells how something came into being—the world, life, or animals, man, and social institutions. In this sense, one can speak of certain continuity between myth and literary fiction, since the one as well as the other recounts the creation (or the "revelation") of a universe parallel to the everyday world. Of course, myth has also an exemplary value in traditional or primitive societies, and this is no more true for literary works. One must keep in mind, however, that a literary creation can likewise reveal unexpected and forgotten meanings even to a contemporary, sophisticated reader. This is not the place to expand such considerations of the function and significance of literature fantastique. I want only to suggest that such types of literary creativity may also constitute authentic instruments of knowledge. The imaginary universes brought to light in it disclose some dimensions of reality that are inaccessible to other intellectual approaches. But certainly, it is not for this reason that most authors write "fantastic" prose. At least, this is not the case for me. But any work of fiction reveals a method aiming at a specific type of knowledge. The methodological implications of literature fantastique are still to be elucidated and systematized. For a historian of religions trying to clarify and improve his own method, this opens an intriguing problem. Actually the historian of religions, in the same way as the writer of fiction, is constantly confronted with different structures of (sacred and mythological) space, different qualities of time, and more specifically by a considerable number of strange, unfamiliar, and enigmatic worlds of meaning.

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# LES TROIS GRACES

IT'S STRANGE he thought of that-strange his last words were, 'Les Trois Graces.' "

Almost thirty-nine years ago. In fact, thirty-nine lacking three weeks. A few kilometers from Vevey, in the woods. If the dog's barking had not brought him to his senses, he might have passed by without seeing them. Probably he had been trying again-for the nth time-to find something to rhyme. He insisted on preserving the Latin name in its entirety: *Euphorbia moldavica id est impudica*. Startled, he turned his head. A large black dog was advancing toward him across the gravel, and behind the dog, half hidden by tall acacias and pines, were three villas such as he had never seen before. They seemed to be separate, and yet they were connected-but he did not understand how they were connected. He stared at them, fascinated, not daring to blink. (Several months after that, Sidonia, scarcely controlling her irritation, had said to him, "I know it's simply a tic, but if only you'd exert a little will power. Pardon me for repeating myself, but for someone who's looking at you-" "But I don't blink all the time," he interrupted her, smiling. "When something interests me-a painting, a landscape, flower ... " "I'm not talking about flowers," Sidonia interjected. "That's your profession." Perhaps it was then, in that moment, that he understood. Those words, "that's your profession," were enough. He shrugged.

"Botany, for me, is first of all a passion; in the second place, it's a very precise science. In any event, I assure you, the tic, if it can be so named, does not appertain to me. It appertains neither to the poet nor to the naturalist.")

"Yes, it is strange indeed," agreed Hagi Pavel. "I mean, the fact that he remembered them, of all things, then, when ... " He broke off abruptly, trying to stifle a sigh. Then, in a lower voice, he added, "May God forgive him!" He picked up his glass of wine.

"Les Trois Graces," Zalomit repeated absently. "Les Trois Graces."

What a dream house! Oh, to be able to work here a whole summer, to do nothing but write! But the dog exasperated him. It was circling around him at a distance of a few meters, barking more and more stridently, not daring to look at him and yet with its head constantly pointed toward him threateningly. He called to it in jest, "Here, doggie!" trying to calm it. Then his eyes fell on the bronze plaque and he read, "Les Trois Graces." "Of course! Now I understand," he whispered.

"But actually, what does it have to do with?" asked Nicoleanu. "What did he mean?"

Hagi Pavel directed his gaze toward Zalomit and smiled sadly. "Youth," he said. "~~Memories of youth. From the time when the three of us were students in~~ Switzerland."

He lifted a hand awkwardly to his eyes and began rubbing them. Then, with a sigh, he refilled his glass.

"I discovered them first," began Zalomit, "but on the following Sunday I brought the others along to admire them too. Les Trois Graces. Indeed, no other name suited them. Because, although there were three of them, they constituted a unity, if you understand what I mean. The boys liked them too, naturally, but I myself was purely and simply enamored-by each one individually and by the three together. We went to see them every Sunday. Once the three of us went on a snowy day. The snow was already several hands deep, but the flakes kept falling, and through the trees, after the lights had been lit inside-because it was in January and it became dark quickly-through the trees, it was as though we had suddenly been transported into a Norwegian fairy tale."

"Another time when we went there, it was snowing," Hagi Pavel interrupted. "But it wasn't so beautiful then."

Zalomit shook his head. "No, you're mistaken. We went in the snow only once, on that Sunday in January, in 1929 or '30."

Hagi Pavel looked at him curiously. "In no event could it have been 1929,because I hadn't come to live in Geneva yet. And not in 1930 either, because I spent that winter vacation at home in Romania."

"Perhaps you're not talking about the same thing," intervened Nicoleanu. "After a few years, memories . . . You know."

"But Les Trois Graces are more than memories of youth," Zalomit interrupted. "At least for me. I had published a plaquette of verses, at my own expense, of course-and without any success, I might add. I had worked that summer on another volume, more pretentious. I was quite enthusiastic about Paul Valery ... When I discovered them there, hidden beneath the acacias and pines, I said to myself, 'If you could only write here for a whole summer, alone, unbeknown to anyone ... ' "

Hagi Pavel turned toward the speaker, frowning.

"I found out the architect's name," continued Zalomit, "and I retained it for a long time, maybe ten or fifteen years. But in spite of all my admiration, I forgot it. Just as I've forgotten so many others ... " He tried to smile.

Hagi Pavel shrugged his shoulders several times. "I don't quite understand what you're referring to," he said.

"At any rate, it's strange that these were his last words,"mused Nicoleanu. 'Les Trois Graces.'"

"As strange as can be," Hagi Pavel agreed. "Every one of us had many adventures in our youth. Some of them we've forgotten; of others we remember only half. What could have made Aurelian recollect, of all things, Les Trois

Grasses? Maybe because, after all these years, we found ourselves together again--we three who were friends during our student years in Geneva. But we had so many other common memories from Switzerland. Why would he have recalled Les Trois Grasses? Especially since, properly speaking--as everyone agreed, not just we three but our fellow students --only two of them were actually fat. Yvonne was more or less the size a Swiss girl of twenty-five ought to have been."

Zalomit changed the position of his chair suddenly and crossed his arms on the table. "I believe we're talking about two entirely different things that have nothing to do with each other. I was talking about the three villas near Vevey called Les Trois Graces, to which we hiked several times, once through the snow on a Sunday in January."

"Now that I listen to you," began Hagi Pavel thoughtfully, "I seem to recall some little storybook houses, with dwarves in the yard and a blue artificial pool ... "

Zalomit made a gesture of weariness. "No, you're confused with some other villas and houses. Les Trois Graces didn't have any dwarves or a pool."

"Perhaps I am confused," said Hagi Pavel. "But I hope you still remember about Yvonne and Henriette and the third girl, whose name escapes me now, with whom we had almost two good years--some of us very good years! You--Yvonne pleased you at first, but I don't believe she was ever a great passion of yours."

"Yes, Yvonne ... Of course I remember her name! But I couldn't tell you what she looked like. As for the other two ... "

"Henriette was rather stout, but as we said then, the devil's gift; she had that 'come hither!' And smart as a whip. Do you recollect how she'd tease you when the three of us would meet the three of them at the Cafe des Vosges? First she'd shout to the whole group, 'Vive Ia Roumanie!' Then she'd catch your eye and add, 'Vivent les Allies!' "

Zalomit shrugged again, smiling sadly, somewhat humiliated. "I'm sorry, awfully sorry, but I don't remember."

"Well, I understand," Hagi Pavel continued. "You were enthusiastic about poetry and flowers. You saw the world differently from the rest of us. Then too, almost forty years have passed."

"But I haven't forgotten the woods near Vevey, nor Les Trois Graces, although, I admit, I hadn't thought about certain events of my youth for twenty-five years."

Abashed, they all fell silent, avoiding one another's eyes. After a while, Hagi Pavel abruptly picked up a second bottle and filled the glasses with great care, as though afraid his hand might tremble.

"Apropos Yvonne," he began. "Do you still remember what Aurelian called the girls at first? He said, 'Deux au Trois Grasses.' "

Zalomit looked at him very intently, then smiled. "He couldn't have said that

then, because in those years the book by Aldous Huxley, Two or Three Graces hadn't been translated into French. If he said it, it must have been later."

"All right, all right," Nicoleanu interrupted them. "We all know that memory is like all our other functions and faculties: approximate and perishable. But, to get back to the last words of Aurelian Tataru, what do you believe he meant?"

"God forgive him!" murmured Hagi Pavel. "Perhaps the fact that the three of us were together, that we had met again after so many years, and just here, in the mountains, as in the old days when we climbed Chamonix ... "

"This part of the Carpathians doesn't exactly resemble the Swiss Alps," Zalomit observed absently. "If he wanted to tell us something, it was probably this: I realize I'm lost, but I'm not afraid of death, and neither should you be. And perhaps he wanted to tell us that death is a fulfillment, an integral perfection of all the higher faculties with which we were endowed. And opening his eyes and seeing us both there beside him, he recalled the perfect harmony of the three villas, separate and yet forming a single architectural body, and he evoked for us this image, *Les Trois Graces*."

"Yes, but you're a poet," Hagi Pavel interrupted. "You see things we ordinary people ... " Zalomit looked at him deeply for several moments, frowning. Suddenly his face lighted and he smiled.

"If you'd like to know, I'm not a poet any longer. Since that afternoon of July when I first set eyes on *Les Trois Graces*, I never tried to write another verse. I've remained what I had to be from the beginning: a botanist. No poetics in the world can attain the perfection and significance of the most timid flower." He rose abruptly and held out his hand. "And now, please forgive me for leaving. I'm going upstairs to my room to stretch out. I'm tired."

Hearing steps on the path, he woke up and looked around quickly. At first he did not recognize him with the beret pulled well down on his forehead and the raincoat over his shoulders.

"In other words, you're not asleep," said Nicoleanu, approaching. He sat down beside him on the grass, wrapping the coat around his knees carefully. "Even in the middle of summer the nights here in the mountains are always cold. You should be careful ... "

"I'm used to it," asserted Zalomit without looking at him. "My area of specialization is the flora of the Carpathians. As much as still remains," he added, mostly to himself. "You stopped to rest here, just a few meters from the place where-" "What time is it?" Zalomit interrupted, turning suddenly toward him. "I left my watch on the nightstand."

"It couldn't be later than three. The sun rises in an hour."

"So, no more than twelve or thirteen hours have passed. I find it impossible to understand how it happened."

Nicoleanu wrapped his coat about him even tighter, shivering. "Nor do I understand," he said. "When I heard you shouting and arrived on the run just tw

or three minutes later, I couldn't believe my eyes. Only an inexperienced child from the city climbing in the mountains for the first time, or someone who had suddenly lost consciousness, could have slipped and fallen head over heels for some twenty to twenty-five meters without trying to grab hold of a root or a tuft of tall grass or even a rock."

"Perhaps he did lose consciousness, or maybe he had a heart attack or something else. I believe this will be determined."

"It may be determined," Nicoleanu interjected, "if the autopsy is made in time and by the proper person." "Had you known him long?" asked Zalomit, turning toward him again.

"I didn't know him well until the last three or four years. Of course, I'd met him several times before. Since we did not have the same speciality, or, more precisely, he no longer had it, we didn't have occasion to meet very often and get acquainted in the years from 1960 to '65."

Nicoleanu prolonged the awkward silence, still trying to adjust his coat. At last he stood up, found the sleeves of the coat, slipped his arms into them, and buttoned it to the top.

"When had you stopped seeing him?"

"Of late we'd been meeting rather rarely, at intervals of several years. But we kept in touch, through mutual friends and colleagues. We seldom wrote to each other, because we were both very much caught up in our professional responsibilities. And yet, when he found out from Hagi Pavel that I was coming to Poiana Dornei in the latter half of June, he wrote to me, proposing that we spend a few days together, the three of us, here at the Chalet. But why do you ask?"

Nicoleanu rubbed his hands together awkwardly. "I want to know if you had kept abreast of his investigations—more precisely, with his discoveries of ten or eleven years ago, when many of us, those of us who specialize in medical biology, believed that Dr. Tataru had discovered, or was on the road to discovering, a treatment for cancer."

"I heard about that a long time ago. And we even discussed it to some extent. Or rather, I questioned him, and he, although paralyzed by his proverbial modesty, admitted to me once that if he were not prevented by circumstances, in two or three years at the most the death rate for cancer would be less than that for tuberculosis or syphilis."

"Yes, this is true. It's been known that someday the problem of cancer will be solved just as the problems of the plague and rabies, for instance, have been solved. But I don't know if Dr. Tataru went into the details."

"I don't think so. He just said that the experiments were as encouraging as possible."

"Many experiments have been encouraging," Nicoleanu resumed, "and yet they have not led to any results. The experiments of Dr. Tataru, which fascinated us twelve or thirteen years ago, were of a different order. They presupposed a revolutionary methodology having nothing to do with anything that had been tried up till then in the scientific treatment of cancer. True, as is customary in such



situations, the secret had to be kept until such time as positive results could be verified in what some call a minimal series: that is, in at least three to five clinics. And so none of us knew in what his experiments consisted. We did, however, find out something about their methodological presuppositions. And when, in the last two or three years, we began to be close friends, Dr. Tataru told me something—of course, not everything, but enough that I understand that what we had heard was not rumors, as was maintained later. Because later, it was maintained—"

He interrupted himself, as if afraid to end the sentence, and remained silent for some time, perplexed. "Anyway, now it can be said," he began abruptly, "because on the one hand Aurelian Tataru is no more, and on the other hand it would seem—in these matters one never knows for sure what is truth and what is rumor or propaganda—it would seem that similar experiments have taken place in laboratories in Russia and the United States. In brief, the idea Dr. Tataru had was this: Cancer is provoked by an excessive and anarchical proliferation of the cells of a tissue or an organ. The physiological process is paradoxical, even contradictory. Because the phenomenon of the vertiginous multiplication of cells indicates a positive impulse—namely, the regeneration of the tissue or the organ in question. In itself, the appearance of neoplasm, the massive proliferation of cells, ought to lead to the total regeneration of the tissues, and ultimately to the regeneration—that is, the rejuvenation—of the entire body. But this positive organic impulse is canceled out by the demented rhythm of the proliferation of cells and by the anarchic, chaotic character of the micro- and macro-cellular constructions; one might say we have to do with a tendency of creation suddenly become amnesiacal, a process physiologically 'a-teleologic,' amputated from intentionality, one which 'creates' unconsciously and haphazardly, without aim, without plan, without structure."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Zalomit. "Simply extraordinary! How pleased Goethe would be by this interpretation of neoplasm as a chaotic creation devoid of meaning! And if he ever read it, how much Aurelian must have liked Goethe's *Morphology of Plants*! I'll never forgive myself for not insisting, not begging more insistently, that he talk to me about his experiments."

"Perhaps he wouldn't have said any more," Nicoleanu resumed. "He suffered, as I dared to tell him once, from an almost pathological modesty."

"And so, what happened? Because I never heard him speak of discovering the treatment, and never again when we met did he mention anything further about those experiments which were so promising."

Nicoleanu sighed deeply and stretched out his arm toward the valley, as if he wanted to point to something. Then, changing his mind, he placed his hand dutifully on his knee.

"What happened I don't know very well myself, but he had to break off his experiments when he was named Chief of Staff at the hospital in Giulati. Did you meet him, perchance, in that year, about 1960-61?"

Zalomit was thoughtful for a moment. "No. Neither in 1960-61 nor in 1962."

"Those who saw him then observed no bitterness. He laughed silently, as he

always laughed. 'What I haven't discovered, others will discover,' he would say. And then he would change the subject."

Of course, it was fatal; I ought to have realized it long ago. With my experience, I ought to have. The project of the Regional Atlas, three monographs ready to go to press, and all that followed: Ursache's smile, the meeting with Catastrofa-Treierarhi, but especially their silence, when Imaculata-Concepciune took the floor. He felt all his blood rush to his cheeks, and he came to suddenly, turning toward Nicoleanu with his whole body.

"But actually, how did Aurelian think to rectify the process of the proliferation of cells? In what did his experiments consist?"

"So far as I can reconstruct from what I know and what I heard from him, Tataru hoped to perfect an organic solution or a serum-I can't be more precise-a solution which, when injected into the region where the proliferation had broken out, would produce a phenomenon, as he told us in jest, of 'anamnesis,' of the awakening of the teleological instinct present in every microorganism. Of course, these are only metaphors. What he believed himself to be on the way to discovering was an agent of reconstruction of the organic impulse. Once he said to me, 'Actually, the discovery will be used more in the medicine of rejuvenation than in the cure of cancer. Because,' he said, 'in a generation or two cancer will disappear as a social scourge, but we will have our work cut out for us with the scourge of cellular degeneration and aging.' "

"A phenomenon of anamnesis of the teleological instinct present in every microorganism," Zalomit repeated, pronouncing the words slowly, jerkily. "If he understood that, he understood all. " With a quick movement he was on his feet. I feel as though I'm dreaming. Everything that's happened since yesterday afternoon seems unreal."

"I too," agreed Nicoleanu, rising with some difficulty. "I can't believe he stumbled and slipped twenty to twenty-five meters on the slope, because it's not even a precipice."

"It seems unreal to me," Zalomit continued, bowing his head, "unreal, that afternoon followed with my eyes for a good while the ambulance bearing the body of Aurelian Tataru, we returned to the Chalet and Hagi Pavel ordered two bottles of wine. I find it impossible to believe it was that way, that these things really happened."

Hagi Pavel wakened him when it seemed he had scarcely fallen asleep.

"Get dressed quickly," he told him. "They've come for the interrogation. Au fond, mon vieux, nous sommes suspects," he added in a whisper.

In the courtyard, the light of the summer morning blinded him. They grouped themselves around a dark young man who was frowning and gesticulating, holding a notebook in his left hand.

"Comrade Professor Filip Zalomit?" he asked. "You arrived the day before

yesterday in the evening, in a car from the Laboratory of Botanical Physiology at Poiana Dornei. Dr. Aurelian Tataru was waiting for you on the terrace, together with Comrade Engineer Hagi Pavel and Comrade Doctor Nicoleanu. Is that correct?"

"Correct," said Zalomit, not daring to look at his companions.

"Then we can leave. And in order to gain time, we'll take the truck.

"Comrade Ciubotariu," Hagi Pavel intervened, "it's very close, not more than a kilometer."

"In order to gain time," repeated Ciubotariu.

After they had alighted from the truck, he coughed several times and began with some solemnity: "So there may be no confusion, I ask you please not to talk among yourselves. I want you to show me how you started on this path yesterday, June 22, at the hour of two or two thirty in the afternoon. You said in your declaration that Dr. Aurelian Tataru set off ahead quickly, that is, he separated from you. About how many meters ahead?" he asked, turning to Nicoleanu.

"Hard to say exactly. Maybe forty to fifty meters. At any rate, not more than a hundred. But on account of the trees we couldn't see him."

"None of you could see him?" Ciubotariu insisted, shifting his eyes from one to the other.

"No.

"So, then, none of you saw him," he concluded; and moistening his finger, he turned a page of the notebook with care. "Now, so there may be no confusion, show me how you were walking, at what distance from one another. Tell me, Comrade Professor."

"At first, we walked side by side. Then, when the path narrowed, we went single file, one behind the other. For a part of the time I was in front, but then--"

"Pardon me," interrupted Ciubotariu. "Is that the way it was?" he asked, addressing the other two. "Did he walk in front for a while?"

"Quite so," said Hagi Pavel. "I remained a step or two behind him, but soon--maybe after five or six minutes Filip, Professor Zalomit, who as you know is a botanist, stopped in front of a plant and bent down to look at it more closely. And then I went on ahead of him, followed by Dr. Nicoleanu."

Ciubotariu looked at each of them in turn, questioning them with his eyes.

"Then, let's go," he said. "Walk as nearly as possible the way you were walking yesterday. I'll remain in the rear. And please, no talking among yourselves."

After about ten minutes Nicoleanu left the path. "Yesterday I stopped here, and told the others not to wait for me. I climbed a little through the trees, approximately there," and he pointed with outstretched arm. "You understand why. I'm both a medical doctor and a biologist," he added, seeing that Ciubotariu was frowning.

"In other words, that is why you were not present."

"I believe that the others weren't present either. "

Ciubotariu opened his notebook again. "Right, they weren't either. Or at least so they wrote, each of them, in the declaration. For how long were you alone?" "Perhaps eight or ten minutes. Then I hurried, in

order to  
catch up."

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"Could you see them at a distance?"

"No. As you can understand now, after only two or three minutes no one could be seen. The path bends sharply several times here, and loses itself among the trees."

"Then, let us hurry," said Ciubotariu.

Nicoleanu and Hagi Pavel were waiting silently near the edge of the woods.

"We had arrived here," began Hagi Pavel, "when we heard a suppressed shout and then a sort of muffled noise which I couldn't identify then—a noise caused, perhaps, by the tumbling of the body."

"And then we both set off on the run," added Zalomit.

Ciubotariu passed silently ahead, then signaled them to follow him. Upon reaching the clearing, they walked faster. A hundred meters farther on a soldier was waiting, smoking in a bored way.

"From here I saw him first," said Hagi Pavel, pointing toward the slope. "It seems to me he was moaning, but I'm not sure now. In less than a minute we were both at his side.

We didn't understand what had happened, why he had fallen, but we didn't believe it was too serious. We thought about how we might lift him and transport him on our arms, but when I laid my hand on him he closed his eyes and groaned.

"Is that how it was?" Ciubotariu queried Zalomit. "He groaned?"

"He groaned, but then he opened his eyes and tried to smile. And because we were asking him over and over, 'What happened? How did you fall?' he looked at us with an expression impossible to describe and whispered, very clearly and without any hesitation: 'Les Trois Graces.' "

" 'Les Trois Graces,' " repeated Ciubotariu. "So you wrote in your declaration. But did he say nothing else—either before or afterward?"

"Nothing. We were both looking at him, expecting him to add something, when realized he was dead."

"Dead," echoed Hagi Pavel.

"Why were you so sure he was dead?" insisted Ciubotariu.

"We've both been to war," explained Hagi Pavel. "I put my hand on his heart, so as a final test, because I still couldn't believe he had died."

"Then I arrived," intervened Nicoleanu. "I also put my hand on his heart. There was no room for doubt. He was dead."

Only after getting out of the truck did they discover that the investigation was not over.

"So there may be no confusion," said Ciubotariu, "I'd like you to clear up two or three further details. Let's go inside the station for a moment." The guard opened the door, then drew it shut and left them alone. After indicating some chairs to them, Ciubotariu seated himself at the desk and began to search in his notebook.

"From your written declarations it follows that although you were quite good friends, you met rather seldom as a group. How did it happen, then, that you met

now, for the first time in many years, and precisely here, at eștina, in a mountain chalet? Comrade Professor Zalomit says that Dr. Tataru, hearing that he was to be at Poiana Dornei, wrote to him, inviting him to spend several days with him here at the Chalet. I presume you have kept the letter, Comrade Zalomit."

"I hope I've kept it."

Ciubotariu turned his head suddenly toward Hagi Pavel. "And you, Comrade Engineer? You met rather infrequently in București, or at least so you have asserted in your written statement. "

"It is true that the three of us met rather infrequently. For a while I saw Professor Zalomit more often, when we were living in the same neighborhood, in Popa Nan. Dr. Tataru I met, after many years, only last winter, but I met him several times in a row. We talked then about the complex being planned at Faraoane, exactly 120 kilometers from here, where I was to take up residence on March 15, and Aurelian invited me for the second half of June. He told me at the same time that the three of us would be together again. The project was not very difficult to accomplish, he added, smiling sadly, 'because it so happens that two of us are confirmed bachelors and the third has been divorced for many years.' We were, so to say, available. During summer vacation, we could meet anywhere. All that was necessary was for one of us to make the decision and inform the others in advance."

"It was the same with me," said Nicoleanu. "Dr. Tataru informed me ahead of time. I'm a widower," he added.

He heard a voice he did not recognize right outside the door.

"No need-I'll introduce myself."

In the next moment the door opened admitting a middle-aged man, tall, slender with thin blond hair combed meticulously so as to cover his entire crown. When he approached, he extended his hand.

"Emanuil Albini. Section of Information and Investigation."

He seated himself in front of a long wooden table and let his eyes run without interest over the boxes containing specimens.

"They're vegetable fossils, or traces of fossils," said Zalomit, smiling. "The majority, ferns and conifers of the Paleozoic era. "

Albini looked at him curiously, as though endeavoring to guess what intention he was trying to camouflage by his terminology, neither elementary nor scholarly.

"Are you very much interested in it?" he asked, suddenly deciding to set his briefcase down beside him on the floor, leaning it against a leg of the chair.

"Paleobotany?" smiled Zalomit. "Paleobotany interests detective-botanists above all, and I number myself among the poet-botanists. But I'm interested in Carpathian flora, and therefore-"

"Why haven't you published any more verses, Comrade Professor?" Albini interrupted gently. Embarrassed because he knew he was blushing, Zalomit drew his chair nearer to the table. "I didn't imagine that after forty

years anyone would still remember ... " "Stained Corollas, by Filip

Zalomit. I read it in liceu. And I believe that since then I've read it at least five times."

"I can hardly believe it," said Zalomit, still troubled, sensing the blood throbbing in his cheeks. "Verses of adolescence, pallid and anodyne, echoes of Ion Barbu and Valery ... "

"And of Dan Botta and others. But they are not pallid, not anodyne. Otherwise I shouldn't have reread them so many times. I kept searching through reviews of the time, but I never came across the name of Filip Zalomit. Perhaps you published under a pseudonym?"

"No. I never published anything else. In fact, I haven't written any more verses since then, since that summer. "

"I too wrote some verses," began Albini in a strange, faraway voice. "I wrote and published even in liceu. I published under five pseudonyms," he added dreamily. "But I haven't written any verses for a long time now. As you said last week at the Chalet, I've remained what I had to be from the beginning, an investigator."

He looked at him fixedly, deeply, in the eyes, then hurriedly reached into his breast pocket and drew out a package of cigarettes.

"You, I know, don't smoke. But I imagine that the smoke of English cigarettes does not damage vegetable fossils." "No," said Zalomit, handing him a ceramic saucer. "They're used to it." Albini laughed briefly, turning the lighter between his fingers.

"But you know, you were not right about *deux ou trois grasses*," he began after lighting the cigarette. "In a letter of January 1930, see what you wrote to Aurelian Tataru. I have here a photocopy."

He opened the briefcase and took out a dossier with slightly faded edges. "But it's better you read it," he added, holding it out to him .

After a while Zalomit realized he was following the lines without understanding what he was reading. Actually, we're both under suspicion. Only the two of us were present. But I don't need to be afraid. As a matter of fact, I'm not afraid. Fortunately, I'm past sixty, and like any intellectual past sixty, I'm vulnerable. At the first blow, I'll collapse. Infarction, aneurysm, cerebral hemorrhage, and so forth. Fortunately, I'm no longer young. They have no way to force me ...

"You're convinced, now, that Comrade Engineer Hagi Pavel was right," said Albini at last. "'Memory, that lofty and permanent treachery .. . 'If I were to drop the word 'permanent,' it might figure as the beginning of a poem. 'Memory, that lofty treachery .. . ' "

"Yes," whispered Zalomit, trying to wake himself. "It could .. . it might be a beautiful poem. "

"I regret, however," continued Albini, "that I must invalidate both hypotheses, both yours and Engineer Hagi Pavel's. Dr. Tataru's last words had nothing to do with memories from your student days. They didn't refer either to the three villas at Vevey or to *les trois grasses*."

"Can that be so?" exclaimed Zalomit. "And yet they were-"

"In Dr. Tataru's papers," Albini interrupted, "were found precise references.

'Les Trois Graces' in this instance were three patients from Brancovici Hospital, where Dr. Tataru began his experiments with the serum in 1960. "

"But then . . .," began Zalomit excitedly.

"I learned this from Dr. Cipatana, the surgeon with whom Tataru was working then, in 1959-60, at Brancovici. And it was confirmed also by other witnesses: Dr. Hutu, Dr. Tataru's closest collaborator, two male nurses, and Professor Doctor Nedelcu, head of the Oncology Section."

He interrupted himself and looked at Zalomit absently for a few moments, then cast his eyes toward the window.

"According to what I understand from Dr. Nicoleanu," he resumed, "you were not informed about the researches of Aurelian Tataru. But now you know what they had to do with: a treatment which should have replaced both radiation and surgery. Should have replaced them, but the serum had not yet been tested sufficiently and Dr. Tataru did not dare object to radiation treatments and operations. In April 1960, Professor Doctor Nedelcu isolated in one wing of the hospital three female patients who had recently undergone surgery. He put them in other words, at the disposition of Dr. Tataru and his co-workers. Through a happenstance which would not greatly surprise people like us, poets and even former poets, these patients, aged fifty-eight, sixty, and sixty-five, were named-"

He hunted in the file and selected a page.

"They were named Aglae Irimescu, Frusinel Chiperii, and Italia Galdau. When Dr. Tataru read the cards he exclaimed, according to Dr. Hutu: 'Les Trois Graces! The Three Graces, Doctor: Aglae, Euphrosyne, and surely, Thalia, because "Italia" is a typographical error.' Parenthetically let me say, it was not an error; the given name of the woman was really Italia. So that we have to do, in fact, with two or three Graces ... Why aren't you blinking any more, Comrade Professor? Don't harm yourself!"

"It's unbelievable," whispered Zalomit, and he began to rub his eyes.

"Everything that followed seemed unbelievable too," continued Albini. "Because according to all the reports, the results were as good as they possibly could be.

Dr. Hutu stated explicitly that they surpassed the most optimistic expectations.

Yet, in spite of this, the treatment was broken off after about three weeks-twenty-two days to be exact. Dr. Tataru was named Chief of Staff of the hospital in Giulaști which had just been established."

"But why?" asked Zalomit, lowering his voice and drawing his chair even closer to the table.

Albini extinguished his cigarette slowly in the ceramic saucer. "Because certain men have no imagination. When Marxist thought will agree to the massive use of imagination, the revolution will triumph everywhere, from one end of the planet to the other. The interruption of the experiments was due to the lack of imagination

of the head man, Professor Docent Doctor Nedelcu, and to a lack of imagination on the part of those who let themselves be influenced by his anxiety. Everyone was afraid that the success of the treatment would provoke a recrudescence of religious obscurantism. "

"I don't exactly understand," said Zalomit softly.

"In a report addressed to the Cadres, Professor Nedelcu wrote that Aurelian Tataru was making jokes, but also allusions, of a religious nature. He even cited examples. For instance, Dr. Tataru supposedly said once, in a group of doctors, that in Paradise, Adam and Eve were periodically regenerated-that is, rejuvenated-by means of neoplasm; that only after the intrusion of original sin did the human body lose the secret of periodic regeneration and therefore of youth without old age; while from then on, from time to time, by a strange and sudden anamnesis, the body tries to repeat the process, and the blind proliferation of neoplasm produces a malignant tumor."

"But this is only a joke, or perhaps a metaphor!" exclaimed Zalomit.

"Maybe it was not just a joke, but even so, what importance could the metaphor or theological commentaries of Dr. Tataru have so long as he did not encourage any counterrevolutionary activity? If Professor Nedelcu and the men of the Cadre had had any imagination, they would have understood that the only thing that counted was the scientific results of the serum. But unimaginative men allow themselves to be hypnotized by clichés and slogans. Religious obscurantism!" Albin became suddenly cheerful, as though he had remembered a successful pursuit. "Of course, magical and religious superstitions are quite dangerous. But even Russian scholars have not hesitated to study yogic and shamanistic practices, while the most important in psychometric and parapsychological research has been realized in Soviet laboratories."

He interrupted his discourse and sought the other man's eyes with a look that was full of meaning.

"We have lost ten years," he resumed after a while. "And the chances of recovering the formula for the serum are minimal. Because after the removal of Dr. Tataru to Giula, part of the laboratory he had set up at the Medical Faculty passed to another section, reserves of the serum were destroyed, and worst of all, Dr. Hutu, believing his career had been compromised on account of his collaboration with Aurelian Tataru, burned all his personal notes and switched his area of specialization. For the past ten years he has concerned himself exclusively with pediatrics!"

Again Albin let his gaze wander slowly beyond the window, toward the wooden fence recently painted, and farther, toward the spindling cherry trees with sparse leaves, preserving, seemingly out of pity, a few stunted cherries. He began searching absently for his lighter.

"Nevertheless," ventured Zalomit, breaking the silence which had become unnaturally prolonged, "-nevertheless, it's absurd that for a few jokes, an exceptional savant should be suspected of religious obscurantism."

"It is not a matter of a few jokes. From the reports I read last week, it can be



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