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Navid Kermani
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Navid Kermani
Forty Lives

Translated by Mike Mitchell

On Grace

[referring to the pp. 17-23 in the German text]

For days now I have not been able to get a 33-year-old Japanese woman out of my mind. She is an architect from the city of Asahikawa in the north of Japan who introduced herself to me when a Japanese friend of mine from the southern city of Fukuoka, who had studied Spanish together with me years ago in Buenos Aires and now works for the agency of a Japanese corporation in Düsseldorf, was taking me through some Japanese webpages on his home computer in Mettmann in order to demonstrate the global simultaneity of recent cultural phenomena which we had been discussing over dinner. Our virtual journey took us, among other places, to so-called chatrooms, one or two of which were devoted to decidedly erotic themes, a fact I only became aware of when he pointed it out, since they do not advertise their character by a certain type of illustration or suggestive signs. As far as his quite good German allowed, my acquaintance translated this or that contribution, which seemed to confirm his thesis that in an erotic chatroom, if nowhere else, the Japanese abandoned the graceful distance I have always associated with their culture, and differed only minimally from English- or German-speaking participants in choice of vocabulary, nicknames and even syntax. You will be surprised, perhaps even disconcerted, to hear that I was in fact capable of comparing this type of Japanese chatroom discourse with its German equivalent, since I had already become acquainted with the attractions of chatrooms, though this is not the place to go into that, and had on that occasion entered some virtual rooms dedicated to sexual activities of a specific, if not entirely savoury nature. Since, then, I had a certain familiarity with our own jargon, my curiosity had been aroused during my guided tour through the Japanese section of the World Wide Web – which, after all, had started out from our discussion of cultural aspects of globalisation – as to whether there was any intrinsic difference between the Japanese and Germans in the way they expressed themselves in chatrooms. I therefore first asked my acquaintance whether chatroom user groups existed in Japan, which he answered in the affirmative without, however, being able to go into detail since, despite being so far from home, it had never occurred to him to communicate via the internet with Japanese he did not know. After only a few minutes using a search engine, he found a website from which we entered, as if by magic, that realm which, in Japan too, is forbidden, if not barred, to minors.

After brief exposure to discussions devoted to various homosexual and sadomasochistic practices, we settled down, with another bottle of red wine, in a chatroom devoted, according to its name, which had been transcribed into Japanese but borrowed from English, to bringing together people interested in real meetings. Things were not exactly busy – presumably, as my friend pointed out, due to the local time – though there was enough going on for me to learn, from his rather arbitrary translations, that something special was due to happen the next night at a particular picnic area on the Kumamoto-Kagoshima motorway. A young man who had taken the Japanese word for a lighted cigarette as his pseudonym (in German it came out as something like 'firestick') was looking for an older woman – preferably married, looks immaterial – for that same night in the Koriyama area, while *Juri17* from Nobeoka drew our attention, though in vain, to a website on which live pictures of her were showing. In contrast to what I remember from German chatrooms, very few seemed to know each other; they talked about their mood at the moment, their predilections, their physical preferences (surprisingly often with a size stated in centimetres, to which greater significance is clearly attached in Japan than here, contrary to the cliché of the spiritual East). Most treated the chatroom simply as a meat market, though with what success we could not tell since, as in Germany, those interested in responding would hardly make this public in the chatroom, but will have taken advantage of the possibility of a private conversation, inaccessible to the others, with those who advertise their availability.

My acquaintance then suggested that, as a joke, I should give him a sentence for him to send – translated into Japanese – to the chatroom. On the one hand I found it impossible to resist the temptation to pretend to be Japanese for once in my life and conduct a lascivious exchange with a woman who was as alien to me as one could imagine, a woman with whom I did not even share a language; on the other hand, I wanted to avoid exposing myself as a lecher, so I resorted to the rather pointless gesture of adapting a line from the poet, Paul Celan, with whom my friend was unacquainted, and asking whether anyone was prepared to serve me with snow, at which the aforementioned female architect, whose pseudonym when translated came out as something like *Fore and Aft*, asked in a private dialogue window which town I lived in. When I asked my acquaintance to give the first town that came into his head, he typed in Kyoto, at which she expressed her regret, since she lived in Asahikawa, which was in the far north of Japan, as my acquaintance explained. A short correspondence ensued in the course of which I learnt her profession, age and marital status, and presented myself to her as a doctor of the same age but,

by contrast, single. Then she wrote, according to my acquaintance, that she had been attracted by my question – borrowed from Celan – about snow because at the moment it was knee-deep where she lived, then abruptly went on to talk about her yearning for someone whom she could caress with her cheeks, someone who would abandon himself to her hair, a statement which led to all sorts of speculation here in Mettmann, since it just did not seem to us to fit in with the rather graphic nature of her pseudonym. I asked my acquaintance to ask her – cautiously – about this contradiction, in particular by pointing out how graceful the desire she had expressed seemed, which took some racking of his brains before he found a satisfactory translation. She did not answer, but asked a question of her own, namely whether it was in principle possible for me to fly at short notice to the North, where, due to a work-related absence of her husband, she was alone with the cold. Without waiting for a definite answer on my part, my acquaintance, in order to learn more about the architect, wrote that I was, in principle, ready to get a flight that same day, should our further conversation confirm the impression of mutual affinity and common desires that was already forming in my mind. After I, or, to be more precise, my Japanese acquaintance had accepted the lure and taken a step towards her, hand outstretched, so too speak, for a endless-seeming minute nothing moved on the screen of his computer until *Before and Aft*, in a gesture of magical gracefulness, turned away from us for good. She wrote that my readiness, in principle, to fly from Kyoto to Asahikawa just for her, had made her happy, but that I would not find her there since – and here, according to my acquaintance, her words turned into poetry – her ship was putting out to sea, on the mast a sail quivering as if in fear; a wonderful journey beneath a sky of blue awaited her. Although not absolutely certain, my acquaintance thought he would not be wrong in attributing the verses, which I asked him to transcribe into Roman letters, to the Japanese poet Kithara Hakuschu, as famous as Celan, though previously unknown to me. Our repeated attempts to contact the architect met with no answer, so we soon left the chatroom, moving on to the pages of the Japanese Winegrowers' Association and the Union of Japanese Fruit Juice Producers until, glancing at the clock – after all I had to sail in my Peugeot back to the capital of the Rhine – I asked my acquaintance to terminate my guided tour round the Japanese portion of the World Wide Web for now, convinced of the global simultaneity of recent cultural phenomena, and of the grace of a thirty-three-year-old architect, who gave herself the name *Before and Aft*, only to borrow from the poet the words *Ho wo kakete kokorobosoge no yuku fune no ichiro kanashi mo ururaka nareba*, if my acquaintance's transcription is correct.

On Literature

[referring to the pp. 34-39 in the German text]

A writer friend of mine told me that a few weeks ago he had had to exclude the most gifted of his students, a young man from Swabia or Baden or Württemberg – neither he nor I can really tell these regions apart – with the significant name of Stefan Hegel, from the course for young writers he had been invited to give by a foundation with connections to a large corporation, because this Hegel kept on interrupting the readings of the texts under discussion, sometimes raising objections at every third or fourth sentence, shouting out, standing up or bursting into tears of horror, disgust or despair. Several times, he said, this Hegel had simply grabbed the book or the pages my friend or, more often, the students were reading from, simply in order to stop them; twice he had even suffered a blackout.

The writer had noticed him even before the course started, he told me, namely when he was going through the applications that the woman from the foundation had sent him, after a preliminary selection, for the final decision, because this Hegel had submitted an eighty-four-page, closely printed manuscript, the sole content of which was an explanation as to why he would never be able to write a story or a poem. If I understood my acquaintance correctly, what this Hegel was more or less trying to do was to demonstrate, using a single example, namely a journey in an aeroplane or, to be more precise, one moment during a flight from London to Stuttgart he had made a few days previously, why it had become impossible to put into words what he, or any other person for that matter, saw, heard, smelt, thought and felt – tangibly or emotionally – simultaneously in one single second. First of all he discussed in detail two tiny samples from texts by authors from the past for whom such a comprehensive picture (which, moreover, was not intended as realistic in the usual sense, but rather condensed the reality experienced into a poetic essence) had still been possible, and then went on to show, through a rigorous analysis of the same few sentences in terms of the development of the language, that they could not be written with the same intention today and would be given a completely different meaning if the reader thought they came from a contemporary author.

In order to demonstrate the infinite extent of any potential subject, this Hegel then went on to describe – with a precision my acquaintance said he had never before come across in his reading – every item of what he simultaneously observed, thought or felt as a passenger in an aircraft, managing at the same time to find, beside or behind every feeling, every impression, every association, one more attendant detail which he had, if not consciously observed, then at least registered at the same moment. Thus his description continued until it broke off after eighty-four pages, just as it had reached the cover of the in-flight magazine, folded over roughly in half by the net on the back of the seat in front, and was about to go on to designate the colour and shape of the two-and-a-half letters of the name of the magazine that could be seen.

If I have understood my acquaintance, the writer, correctly, all this Hegel had managed to do up to that point – on the eighty-four closely printed pages, that is – was to distinguish between four smells and record some visual features of the seat in front, which was in his line of vision. So you get an idea of the extensive or, to be more precise and at the same time do young Hegel retrospective justice, the infinite nature of what could have been described, if Hegel had not brought his attempt to put into language the reality of one single second to a premature end. My acquaintance was undecided as to whether the abrupt end was a result of the author's giving up or, on the contrary, of his conviction that he had sufficiently proved his initial assertion.

For all his sympathy for the author's dedication to detail, my acquaintance said, he had not found the manuscript entertaining, it was too monotonous for that, but he had been impressed, indeed overwhelmed, by the precision of his descriptions, the brilliance of his formulations, but above all by his deadly earnest, his single-mindedness. (If I were to reveal who my acquaintance is, you would realise how difficult he is to impress, never mind overwhelm.) It was magnificent, he said, monotonous, yes, but magnificent, the best thing he had read for a long time, and therefore he had not hesitated to accept this Hegel onto the course, which, by the way, was held in the South Tyrol, not far from Roverda, where Goethe encountered his beloved Italian live for the first time. During the course my acquaintance only managed to have a more or less normal conversation with this Hegel when there was no literary text being read. The reasons Hegel gave for his behaviour had exclusively to do with language and literature. Although he went out for a walk with him two or three times, my acquaintance never managed to establish any other motivation, either of a biographical, social or political nature. Despite his sincere-sounding assurances outside the seminar room that he would not interrupt the next reader, during

the sessions this Hegel found it impossible to control himself, so that eventually my acquaintance had no option but to expel this thorn in everyone's flesh, who was so infuriated that he became abusive and spoke scornfully of my acquaintance and his writing.

What distressed my acquaintance most, he said, was the fact that this Hegel was by no means always wrong in his damning criticism of the texts that were read out; there was no doubting the soundness of his judgment in matters of literature. But what could he have done? my acquaintance asked. After all, he felt an obligation towards the other participants as well, especially given the fact that this Hegel refused to engage in discussion, at most he would repeat his critical pronouncements over and over if anyone tried to contradict him. As he had feared, he went on, even after Hegel's disappearance the course never really got going, either because he still found it impossible to relax or because his students lacked talent. And now he was annoyed with himself that in his anger he had given the eighty-four-page manuscript back to Hegel, not without some hurtful comments of his own. After he had returned home, he had tried to ring him up and had written him a letter, though without receiving any answer. My acquaintance seemed to have been drained by this to an extent that was quite out of proportion to the incident. He looked tired and seemed to have aged, though of course I don't know whether his appearance really was due to the course alone. Since then, my acquaintance said, he had not written a single line, he had not even managed to write his report on the course, for which the foundation was waiting. On the other hand, lethargic phases are not that unusual, even for such a prominent and important writer as he is, and the course, as I said, finished only a few weeks ago, so that I have hope that he will soon be back at his desk and might even write something of his own – and incomparably better than my attempt – about this Hegel, who would himself be a suitable subject for a work of literature.

On Virtue

[referring to the pp. 40-44 in the German text]

Moritz Pollesch has a friend called Albrecht, who claims he is going to kill his nine-year-old son within two to three years. Although Moritz cannot imagine Albrecht would be capable of such a deed, he is naturally concerned and horrified that his friend could even consider the idea, a friend who, as Moritz insisted when he came round this afternoon to ask my advice, had always seemed to him the incarnation of virtue, a thoughtful and, for all his somewhat irritating perfection, thoroughly kind-hearted person. The only conclusion, as far as I can see from what Moritz, as the sole repository of Albrecht's confidence, has told me, is that his friend is serious about his horrendous proposal, at least for the present, although Moritz maintains that there is every hope he will eventually see reason. After all, he pointed out, his boy – a fantastic little lad in Moritz's opinion – was of such a sunny disposition, surely Albrecht's heart would be touched? To my suggestion of discussing it with Albrecht's wife or, if the worst came to the worst, informing social services, or even the police, Moritz replied that, of course, that had occurred to him already, but Albrecht was such a principled character that nothing in the world would stop him carrying out a decision he considered right. Since, Moritz went on, Albrecht would expect the punishment, indeed would certainly hand himself over to the police and accept both the rupture with his family and the loss of his position in society, there was no sanction strong enough to stop him killing his own son. If one were to take preventive measures to thwart him, he would probably – for all his parade of ethics, he was a cool, calculating type – simply deny ever having expressed the intention of killing his son. And even if, for the sake of argument, one were to imagine that, for whatever reason, he lost custody of his son, the latter would still not be safe, since they could not put his father in prison for life and it would be just as absurd to try and get him committed to a psychiatric clinic when he did not show the slightest pathological symptom in his normal, everyday life.

He had, said Moritz, observed in Albrecht a tendency to be somewhat extreme in his remarks on morality, philosophy or politics, an inability to make allowances for other people, especially those politicians who in his eyes were guilty of opportunism, unnecessary compromises or a lack of consistency, but the idea that his friend might have gone mad had only

occurred to him after yesterday evening, despite the fact that Albrecht had appeared completely normal, indeed rational, as he spoke of the forthcoming murder of his son. Albrecht had explained his motives so clearly, with such compelling logic, that all Moritz had been able to do was to declare him wholly mad, without being able to refute his arguments in detail. But why for God's sake did Albrecht want to kill his son? I asked, to which Moritz explained it was Albrecht's view that the only happy years in the life of a human being were in childhood, if at all, roughly up to the age of six. Faced with the question of whether he wanted children of his own, Albrecht had told him he had hesitated for a long time before coming round to the view that it was worthwhile being born for childhood alone, though life became increasingly unbearable, as he knew from his own experience. The only reason he did not kill himself, he had said, was that his personal philosophy demanded he defy the enemy, which was how he regarded fate, but he felt he could not, with a clear conscience, burden a child with life, nor with the agonising decision whether to end it by its own hand or to wait until the end came of its own accord. Since, Albrecht had gone on to explain, he was acquainted with the happiness the early years could bring a person, he had acceded to the request of his girlfriend of the time, now his wife, to have at least one child, at the same time secretly deciding to make its life a bed of roses at first and then to kill it off before life had the chance to become a torment. Though his own personal opinion was that early childhood alone was worth living, he did not, he told Moritz, want to rush anything and had resolved to act on the logic of his own perception only when it was beyond doubt. As a man of great experience and even greater reflection, he knew that the gnawing uncertainty, which appeared with puberty at the latest, never disappeared, at most it would infiltrate even deeper levels of a person's mind, assuming the person remained conscious of their fate. For his part, he said, he had no intention of fathering a child for it to go through life lacking self-awareness.

Without spoiling him, Albrecht had said, he had given his son the happiest childhood imaginable, had enjoyed every minute with him and made sure that the boy enjoyed life too, that he had fun and friends, a home where he felt secure and loved. But in two or three years time at the latest, he had continued, when his son became aware of his own loneliness, he would not be able to help him any more, given that he himself was helpless in face of the horror. Then there would be only one thing left that he could do for his son, and that was to save him from the rest of his life. Moritz confirmed that the boy seemed strikingly well-adjusted and carefree, and even

went so far as to remark that there might well be something in Albrecht's view that his son's contented childhood was, at least in part, due to his – Albrecht's – decision to put all his love into those first years. What about the mother? I objected. How could Albrecht do that to his wife, kill her only child? Naturally he had asked Albrecht the same question, Moritz replied. His friend's answer had been that it was impossible that his wife would suffer more than he would. In addition to the maximum grief he would be faced with, he would have to endure the destruction of his whole life, his marriage included, prison, the stigma, as well as the pangs of conscience which, despite his conviction of the virtuousness of his action, would torment him for the rest of his life. But he would not permit his wife, any more than himself, knowingly to let his son end up in misery simply because she believed she could not bear the loss herself.

On Wisdom

[referring to the pp. 176-178 in the German text]

When life becomes impossible for Gerhard, when his fingers refuse to write a letter, his eyes to read a file, his lips to telephone, his legs to carry him to a desk, when nothing – neither friends, detective novels, jogging, TV, his Play Station, cooking, shopping, emails, the net, chatrooms, going out, going for a walk, driving along in his new Saab with music blaring, spring cleaning, planning a holiday, having a sauna plus Claudia's Ayurvedic massage, nor even a Christian Dior bubble-bath at 95° – promises relief, when getting sick or a migraine is a possibility, but would be no answer for the simple reason that there is no answer to this misery beyond words, and therefore impossible to describe here, a misery which spreads further with his every breath, even though it has long since filled all his thoughts and vitals, when, that is, the hour has come in which – all things considered, including the fact that no one would miss him apart from Friedrich – there is nothing left but to make a end of it, he comes to a decision which Friedrich calls incomparably wise because, under conditions which exclude any possibility of relief, it is based on the assumption that all conditions do eventually change, because everything is always changing, if only for the banal reason that we get used to existing conditions and getting used to

things represents a relief which there were no previous grounds to assume. This wisdom, to put it succinctly, consists of taking the non-definitive nature of human beings into account in such a definitive matter as his own death. What Gerhard does, namely, is to start by throwing away not his life, but his time, even though he has been short of it in almost every minute of the last decade, he declines to accept it, no, he gives it away unused, gives it back like an expensive present, a joy in any other situation but at the moment worse than useless, an irritation, a torment, and goes to bed at eight o'clock, sometimes as early as six or five, if not at three or two in the afternoon. And indeed, Friedrich says, while things are not actually any better when he gets up, experience so far indicates that they are not so bad that Gerhard could not make it to his next, if necessary artificially induced, repose. By thus restricting himself to holding out, against all external factors, until the sole remaining distraction, namely sleep, comes, he survives time until, after two, or five, or sometimes even fourteen days, other distractions – a bubble-bath, his Saab, meetings – begin to be effective once more, producing the absolutely unexpected, to have counted on which Friedrich finds incomparably wise: things are all right again, they're not great, but neither are they so bad that life is impossible for Gerhard.