



# Da nuces pueris

Gabriel Ferrater

## In Memoriam

When the war broke out, I was fourteen  
years and two months old. To begin with  
it had practically no effect  
on me. My head was stuffed with something else,  
which even now I see as being more  
significant, discovering Les Fleurs  
du Mal, and that meant poetry, of course.  
There is another element, however,  
the one that really matters, which I can't  
find words for. Revolt? No, even if that's what  
I called it then. Stretched out flat inside  
a hazel grove, at the heart of a rose  
whose leaves resembled, limp and very green,  
caterpillar skins that had been peeled  
off, bedded there in the crutch of the world,  
happy revolt grew thicker and thicker  
inside me, while the country echoed with  
the shots of revolt and counter-revolt,  
I cannot tell whether happy or not,  
but more rebellious than I was. Life on  
the moral plane? That comes quite close, but has  
an air of ambiguity for me.

The best word for it might be egoism,  
and it is worth remembering that when  
we reach the age of fourteen we are forced  
to change first person habits, since the plural  
already fits us rather tightly, and  
the singular stylite, a nauseous  
ascent to the top of oneself, appears  
a good plan for the future. Then the years  
come and, happily, also depart,  
our hand increasingly grows tired as it  
fondles the stubborn forehead of the lamb  
within, and we find ourselves adopting  
this plural, which I cannot securely  
define as modest, and which renounces  
the singular, abandoning it, while  
thanking and rewarding it. Enough.

Once the holidays were finished, yes,  
I saw someone had battered my world's face  
into a new shape. Blood and fire. They did  
not strike me as horrific, but they were

the blood and fire of every age. They burned the priests' school that I studied in, and Guiu, the sergeant we all hated, who took us for gym in preparation for the army, (I go back to the first person plural because life always travels backwards) had been shot and killed. They told us that it was a major undertaking, as he wore a coat of chain mail when he went disguised as an old peasant woman, and hid three grenades beneath the eggs he carried in his basket. They shot him on the corner of the Placeta d'Hèrcules, beside the institute, where we used to come out to spend the break between two lessons. I cannot remember that we found the place altered in the slightest, or that we looked for a bullet in a plane-tree trunk or any other evidence. As for the blood, what need is there to say the wind carried it off, maybe that very day? Maybe the dust was a bit heavier as a result, that's all. I cannot tell for certain if I do remember how the college walls were blackened, or if I merely think I do. We never entered. We were sloughing off our skins, and had no interest in the tatters of the old one. Our nostrils were filled with the fear which was the perfume of that autumn, and yet it struck us as good. It was an adult fear. We were emerging from our childish fear and, luckily for us, our world became almost totally easy. The more fear they experienced, the freer we felt. It was the same old story, and we vaguely sensed that, in our case, the wheel was turning ever faster. We were happy.

Happy all together, always, very. They made us join a trade union, and it gave us various and stimulating pleasures. In a requisitioned flat, for us an enemy flat that we had occupied (I mean our enemy, not the official one) behind the smoke from poker tables, we removed both books and furniture, and bartered guns and bullets, exchanged Roman salutes (there was no special reason for this, we preferred our own side, but the opposing one was more renowned

for wickedness), tried to lure the girls into the corners and, because it didn't work, disgruntled, used the balcony for our entries and exits. We discovered whores and robbery. We would have seen things being robbed in any case: as for the brothels, we'd have gained admittance there soon enough. The war saved us a few months, however. We sat out the first air raid sheltering in one of them they called "la Sol", all of us terrified of being found. Significantly shrunk, our fathers still held power. Isidre was the first of us to catch the clap. His father could hardly have chosen a worse moment to buy the bicycle he had been asking for insistently. We had to take turn about borrowing it from him, providing him with an excuse for not using it himself. My memories of that period are filled with bicycles, the thing we robbed most often. We set up a full scale workshop to paint them afresh and reassemble them, the frame from one, another's wheels, tyres from another still.

I don't know why, one afternoon when all of us had slipped away from home, leaving the day's main meal half finished, for a trip to the castle at Tamarit, I shut the door and was without a bicycle. What I wanted to do was rent one, but I found the shop they knew me at was closed. It made me furious. I refused to give up. I kicked the door and beat upon it with my fists. It opened to me. There was no-one there. I seized the bike and left a note for them. The trip was nerve-racking. An unremitting wind bent us double. On the way back we had it in our faces. Standing upright in the pedals, as if I were climbing a steep slope, transfixed and trembling, I struggled on, without making progress. Gradually we lost sight of one another. Agustí and I spent ages resting in the shelter of the ditch beside the fields that they were levelling to make an airport out of. We finished the return journey by night and walking half the time. At the first houses we found an open bakery and threw

ourselves upon it. We were kids, much more truly kids than our age might suggest: falling onto the chill tiles of the floor we ate several loaves that had just come out of the oven, burying our faces completely in them, crazy with the pleasure of being merely fatigue, hunger and weight. Anything could happen, and the sudden racket - footsteps, shouts - did not surprise me, nor did the oily gun barrels that pointed directly at me where I lay, nor someone pulling me up, shoving me in a van, nor that my father was waiting for me in a place I did not know, engaged in argument with lots of people, where the fathers of my friends were waiting, too. Little by little mine appeared to gain the upper hand, and took me home. The next day I understood the business had been collectivised. The members of the junta were incensed, and spent the whole evening chasing after us to get a bicycle back which its former owner would doubtless have been more than happy to rent out on those conditions. They were not. Briefly, our fathers struck us as important.

That wasn't all we robbed. For a long time we were obsessed with underpants. A crowd of us would walk into a shop, inspect the wares, sort through them and buy nothing, while we crammed our jerseys and shirts full of underpants. I don't know what we did with them. Nor can I understand what stopped them catching us. The likeliest explanation is that at the time they constantly suffered a sort of seasickness, were shocked and perhaps twisted, too, so that their sense of order had been affected. They were indifferent to being robbed, or else it turned them on. All we knew was that the shopkeepers gave into us with eyes that watered, like a woman who is vanquished by her rapist. I remember one day our choice fell on Subietes' shop again, a place we often visited and never left empty-handed. The owner himself served us, laid the boxes out upon the counter, opened them, and when he took them back out of our reach, counted up all the items aloud. We returned them without insisting

and he counted them over again. When we emerged, swollen with pride, I showed the pair of underpants I'd taken at the start, before he counted them the first time. And that was not all: Albert had taken more. They all slept, with a crackling in their ears.

Subietes, too, died violently. If now I think of him, I see black and white clothes, worn by someone who looked really old. Maybe he wasn't. As goes for the black, I don't think it was mourning: the man couldn't keep away from mass, and in those days all churchgoers wore black, as did a few older men who cared about their clothes, along with a Republican or two, the kind who never wavered all their lives. Old Subietes went to jail because he was a Catholic. His luck had run out. After they had taken him off, one day huge panic broke out. The Italians were at Salou. They'd already disembarked. Our local junta requisitioned three or four coaches, put in the prisoners they held and drove them to a ditch at the roadside. It happened very quickly and took up no more time than that imagined peril. One of the drivers requisitioned with their coaches, who had to spectate, was Ton. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched, appalled, as one after another the passengers alighting brushed against his seat in passing by. He knew them all, or nearly all. Mr Subietes saw the horror in Ton's face, and was affected by it. On the point of getting out, he halted for a moment, placed his hand upon Ton's shoulder, and told him: "You see the pass that things have reached, Tonet." Scant comfort. I also knew the man responsible for that day's massacre, the junta's leader.

Oliva is the man I want to talk about now. He had been, before the war, doorkeeper at the cinema we went to every Sunday, the Sala Reus, where we'd taint our hands with love. I haven't seen him since then. The one image that I have of him is wearing leather, carrying a Luger with a butt of pale wood, longer than his thigh, making it seem more like

a banner than a weapon. War provokes  
a hankering for symbols. Both of them  
loved rituals, Oliva and his wife.  
They commandeered a wealthy family's mansion  
and settled there. Immediately she  
decided that important people had  
to decorate their house with cactus plants.  
She'd come to see in them a sign of what's  
superfluous in rich people's lives, the merest  
shadow of a soul, beneath the huge  
sun of ownership. She was the one  
who owned things now, and laughed, the women all  
laughed, and bought life turned a commodity,  
material at last, trimmed of its hopes.  
The moment only lasted two or three  
months, in which the women of the people  
went around laughing, feeling no surprise  
at how things were. They'd always laughed that way.  
Hope came back to them, and buying was  
a thing you did in secret, practised by  
the rich more than the poor. We reached the turning  
point, and the road back was gradually  
hemmed in by boundaries we recognised.  
I often saw Oliva and the other  
members of the junta sitting at  
a café table, waiting for each other,  
or rushing down a street to sit and wait.

One evening we had a symphony concert.  
My father took me to it, and I was  
so impatient I shook from head to toe.  
Music parfois nous prend comme une mer.  
The sea that overwhelmed me that night was  
of an epoch about to be lost, one  
you could see disappearing, taking back  
the things that it had promised. The idea  
of yielding myself to another current,  
more personal, at any rate without  
companions other than my father, filled  
me with excitement. Beethoven, Ravel  
were the composers that I heard, and if  
they overwhelmed me, I cannot tell now  
what destination they impelled me towards.  
Once the concert was over, they played anthems:  
Riego, the Internationale, the Reapers,  
the Anarchist song that the FAI had taken  
as their own tune. Oliva disapproved,  
and poked his head out from the stage's edge,  
shouting. So as not to hear, we clapped  
more loudly still. Oliva watched the faces  
laughing at him, and he went on shouting,

noiselessly, like a flame. All of us laughed,  
applauded, spilled over into a stream.  
The way friends do (and afterwards my father  
and I really were friends) we put off going  
home, and sat together over coffee.  
We spoke of politics: it seems to me  
that then it seemed to me there was no need  
for a revolt of any kind (it is  
not politics I have in mind), that young  
and old could form one single, happy group.  
At night time, in a café, it's OK  
to have a father. Oliva came in.  
Now I would realise he'd taken three  
or four glasses too many. We were sitting  
next to the door, and he saw us at once.  
Clutching his gun's huge butt, so that it helped him  
keep his balance, looking at my father,  
"You", he said, "you were the one who did it."  
(In those days it was a ubiquitous  
pursuit to hunt for guilty parties, though  
the charge was never clear. No matter what  
it was confronted them, they looked around  
for someone who was guiltier than the others.)  
My father managed, with a scattered phrase  
or two, to shift the man's attention, and  
Oliva let the butt go. Later on,  
when my father explained it, their exchange  
became much longer. I could not make out  
his reasons for dispersing its concise  
virtue. Now I fully understand  
his purpose: he was trying to disperse  
a mist his voice had not betrayed at all,  
but which had glimmered in his eyes. A mist  
that fascinated me, although I did  
not give it its true name on the occasions  
when it flickered in mine. I came close to it  
three days later, in the corridor  
at "Ca la Sol", when unexpectedly  
I met Oliva face to face. When we  
young men toured round the brothels, it did not  
occur to us this was our rightful kingdom,  
and they, carrying their pistols, furtive guests.

Then a time arrived of multiple  
journeys. Somebody was shuffling us  
as if we were a pack of cards, composed  
of places and of people. Six or seven  
years later, without warning, Oliva  
entered our lives again. My mother met him.  
One evening in Bordeaux, she was at home  
alone, opened the door, and found him there.

He climbed our stair because he had heard people  
from his own village lived on it. He wanted  
help of some kind, was working in a German  
factory, the told her, at Royan,  
or so I think. The building and the camp  
annexed to it had been destroyed by bombs.  
Oliva happened to be absent, but  
he lost all he possessed, belongings, money,  
everything except a life that made  
no sense to him, one that he was no longer  
answerable for: the Germans would  
take charge of his new fate. Maybe my mother  
was the last woman he spoke to who knew  
a thing about him. She gave him a few items  
of clothing, which perhaps he never got  
to wear. Another British air raid caught him  
two days later.

Seeing I did not  
immigrate to Saint Germain from Oran,  
fear hardly strikes me as a major theme  
for literature or for philosophy.  
Many men have felt fear, that is sure,  
and it is right they should be spoken of.  
It should be said that Oliva felt fear,  
and inspired fear in many people, not  
a lot in me or in my father, more  
in Ton, in other people fear as great  
as that he felt himself, or even greater.

Traduït per Christopher Whyte