Part One
II • Some Varieties of Armor and Innocence

Three perspectives and voices have much influenced my thinking about distance and compassion and very much govern the shape and texture of this book. The first, Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” is so central, in fact, both in its argument and imagery, that this entire book could be viewed as a commentary on the poem.

MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or
just walking dully along;
How when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns
away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.1

Eventually I shall want, above all, to weigh the content of this poem, the extent to which Auden and the Old Masters
are right or "never wrong" about the position of suffering, and we shall meet a great many witnesses to that martyrdom and fall. But first, what shall we say for Auden's own position? It is certainly a civilized and reasonable one. Auden (or, to be more precise, the narrator of the poem) is not unmindful of the suffering nor is he callous toward it. He is aware of the distance between the sufferers and those whose centers of attention are elsewhere. To a degree the poem reminds us of that distance, attends to it, and implies that the ironies of such distance are worth pondering. At the same time, however, the poem and its author also keep their distance. They too avert their eyes from the details of the dreadful martyrdom in that untidy corner. They do not render the screams of the tortured person or the precise ways in which that person's flesh was torn. Nor do they remind us of the probably more sanitary police stations, prisons, concentration camps, or reeducation centers in which such martyrdoms continue to occur, places to which it is unlikely dogs have access and where the torturers will be awaited not by horses but by a car or jeep, with a bumper in place of a behind, capable neither of innocence nor guilt. They note the forsaken cry of Icarus and the white legs disappearing into the sea but say nothing of the inside or outside of the fragile head as it must have smashed against the water. It would not be fair to call the author complacent, but neither does he seem troubled or even anxious. Unlike some of the writers we shall be looking at, he is not rubbing his own guilty behind against a tree. In fact, one of the things he is not aware of—at least he does nothing to make us aware of it—is that he has a behind, either innocent or guilty. And though the poem is not heartless, Auden is at pains to keep his own heart under wraps.

Auden would probably be glad to hear this said, for he is generally suspicious of those, especially poets, who let their hearts hang out, and has made some devastating comments on that subject. Here is one that connects very closely with the poem:

There are events which arouse such simple and obvious emotions that an AP cable or photograph in *Life* magazine are enough and
poetic comment is impossible. If one reads through the versified trash inspired, for instance, by the Lidice Massacre, one cannot avoid the conclusion that what was really bothering the versifiers was a feeling of guilt at not feeling horrorstruck enough. Could a good poem have been written on such a subject? Possibly. One that revealed this lack of feeling, that told how when he read the news, the poet, like you and I, dear reader, went on thinking about his fame or his lunch, and how glad he was that he was not one of the victims.²

This is an interesting statement. It seems at first to insist that, like the figures in the poem, we are all relatively indifferent to the suffering, and that our utterances, especially our poems, should reflect or confess that indifference. Yet it is Auden who has remembered the Lidice Massacre and said that such events do arouse such simple and obvious emotions (by which he must mean horror, pity, or sympathy) that poetic comment is impossible. And when he turns to our lack of feeling and our self-concern, I think he at one and the same time is protesting his indifference too loudly and is leveling a judgment against the inadequacy of his and our indifferent responses. It is hard to decide in what direction the weight of the passage finally falls. And it is hard to decide whether he is more troubled by the pretenses of emotion or by the lack of feeling.

Some further passages from the same work are illuminating though perhaps equally indeterminate in final emphasis.

The girl whose boy-friend starts writing her love poems should be on her guard. Perhaps he really does love her, but one thing is certain: while he was writing his poems he was not thinking of her but of his own feelings about her, and that is suspicious. Let her remember St. Augustine’s confession of his feelings after the death of someone he loved very much: “I would rather have been deprived of my friend than of my grief.”³

Here both Auden and Saint Augustine are suspicious about self-indulgences of the heart but in their very expression of that suspicion assert their high valuation of love and imply that hearts should cherish friends and lovers.
Or again, when he writes that "the poet is capable of every form of conceit but that of the social worker:—'We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for I don't know,'" he is attacking the expressed concern for the welfare of others but does so by emphasizing the real insufficiency of such concern, at least among professional do-gooders, its latent contempt for others. But since all these explications, I suspect, do Auden too much and too little justice and do not really capture his curious patterns of concern and evasiveness, let me, for the moment at least, give him the last words:

The present state of the world is so miserable and degraded that if anyone were to say to the poet: "For God's sake, stop humming and put the kettle on or fetch bandages. The patient's dying," I do not know how he could justifiably refuse. (There is, of course, an inner voice which says exactly this to most of us, and our only reply is to be extremely hard of hearing.) But no one says this. The self-appointed unqualified nurse says: "Stop humming this instant and sing the Patient a song which will make him fall in love with me. In return I'll give you extra-ration cards and a passport"; and the poor Patient in his delirium cries: "Please stop humming and sing me a song which will make me believe I am free from pain and perfectly well. In return I'll give you a penthouse apartment in New York and a ranch in Arizona."

To such requests and to the bribes that go with them, the poet can only pray that he will always have the courage to stick out his tongue, say, like Olaf the conscientious objector in Cummings' poem—"There is some s. I will not eat,"—and go on humming quietly to himself.\

The second voice and vision, one that for a long time has haunted my own consciousness and that will very much haunt the pages of this book, is the voice and vision responsible for the following passage in George Eliot's novel Middlemarch:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some faintness of heart at the real new future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency has not
yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and per­haps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hear­ing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.⁶

As with the Auden poem, it is the content of the passage—that roar and that wadding—that will most absorb me. But it is worth pausing to observe that here too, just as in the poem and passages of Auden, the author is revealing and urging more compassion than her statement may at first seem to intend. Though her own tone is judicious and somewhat detached, it is also sympathetic; and though we are not expected to be “deeply moved” or to view Mrs. Casaubon’s situation as “tragic,” George Eliot has, herself, indicated that there is an element of tragedy (which she can perceive) that might move us deeply if our emotion were less coarse and we had a keen enough vision and feeling and if we were not so “well wadded with stupidity.” In this way she has not only permitted but encouraged her readers to try to respond with more sympathy, anguish, and involvement than her own tone seems to have manifested. Despite her warning that too keen a vision, too much compassion, would be unbearable, might even destroy us, she is asserting the validity and desir­ability of such a vision. In fact, much of Middlemarch is an attempt to cut through the “wadding” of her characters and readers, an effort to make heard that roar behind the silence.

The third perspective is a particular instance of individual wadding (or hardness of hearing, to use Auden’s metaphor) that has flabbergasted me for many years. That perspective is the one revealed when Vittorio Mussolini writes that the explosion of a bomb in the midst of a group of Ethiopian horsemen was like a rose bursting into bloom, and most amusing.⁷ It is hard to know whether he is reporting his actual perception of the moment or his recollection of it in a moment of later tranquility or whether he is oblivious of the shocking quality of his simile or is striving for it. I am not sure it matters much. In some respects the matter is simply one of
distance. He was watching the event from an airplane, at a
distance from which he literally could not hear the cries of
pain or see the torn and bleeding flesh, of either the men or
the horses. Had he been among them, it is unlikely he would
have thought of a rose. If nothing else, the odor would have
been quite different. Quite certainly he would not have found
it amusing. Had he been on the ground watching from a dis­tance of twenty yards, even as an enemy, the noise and sight
of the thrashing limbs would no doubt have left him feeling
less flowery. Depending upon the size of the bomb, a large
metallic thorn might have pricked his finger or perhaps torn
one of his eyeballs. There is no telling what a rosy bomb will
do. Had he been a mile up in the sky, he might only have seen a
puff of dust or smoke and wondered what it was. But from
where he was, he was reminded of a rose. No one in Bruegel's
painting or Auden's poem seems to have occupied quite the
distance Mussolini chose.

Probably they were right to leave such a witness out. For
there cannot be many whose wadding is so curiously con­structed as to permit quite so complacent, not to say amused,
transmutation of suffering into beauty. Still, one cannot sim­ply commit him to that nightmare realm in which we hold at
a distance our knowledge of the Neroes and Caligulas, and of
Ilse Koch, who made lampshades from the skin of the people
in her concentration camp.

For one thing, he is in the company of so many writers, to
say nothing of gardeners, who have done some form of vio­lence to the rose by likening it to so many things it is not like
and by using it to savor their own scents. More seriously,
though, he is one of a large company of writers whose re­sponse to suffering could be called aesthetic. Few of them are
quite so complacent, and for many the aestheticism is a way
of containing and expressing their pity or compassion; but as
we shall see, writer after writer has leaped gracefully between
beauty and pain. Indeed, much of literature could be defined
as a transmutation of suffering into aesthetic form and there­fore from a hostile view be regarded unfairly only as another
form of wadding. Then, too, in Mussolini's defense, we can
say that there is a vantage point, a distance that nearly all of us have occupied at least for moments, from which the entire spectacle of human suffering and endeavor can appear beautiful, calm, or orderly, from which the torment and death of an Oedipus or a Lear appears as a species of beauty, and even a cloud of lethal dust becomes a richly growing mushroom. There is a distance too from which our entire endeavor, from Icarus to Einstein, from Christ to McCarthy (either one), must seem absurd. It may be, in fact, that there is in the distance only distance or perhaps a Cosmic Joker or that we are to all the gods as flies to wanton boys, who kill us for their sport. Or it could be that since He is made in our image, He too is merely “hard of hearing” or well wadded with stupidity.

Such remarks as these, though, involve an armoring of myself that feels evasive and insincere, and does not alter my sense of horror at Vittorio Mussolini’s remark and at the peculiar degree of distance and deafness it reveals.

With these three perspectives as partial reflectors, let me turn toward the responses to suffering of several young men, and to some responses of my own toward them. The first is the response of a very young one—Nick Adams in Hemingway’s “Indian Camp.”

Young Nick, who is then about seven or eight years old, has gone at night with his doctor father and his Uncle George to a settlement of Indians where a woman has for two days been having great difficulty in giving birth to a baby. After being rowed across the bay by some Indians and walking through the woods, they enter a shanty in which the woman is lying on a wooden bunk. Above her in the upper bunk is her husband, who had cut his foot very badly with an ax three days before. As they enter the room, the woman screams.

Nick’s father ordered some water to be put on the stove, and while it was heating he spoke to Nick.

“This lady is going to have a baby, Nick,” he said.

“I know,” said Nick.
"You don't know," said his father. "Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labor. The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born. All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what is happening when she screams."
"I see," Nick said.
Just then the woman cried out.
"Oh, Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?" asked Nick.
"No. I haven't any anaesthetic," his father said. "But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important."
The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall.

While the father successfully performs a cesarean operation on the woman, who is held by Uncle George and three Indians, Nick stands by with a basin. We are told that it all "took a long time." It is not clear how much of the operation Nick was able to bring himself to watch, but after the baby is delivered Nick looks away "so as not to see what his father was doing," does not look at what his father puts in the basin, and as the father sews up the incision "did not watch. His curiosity has been gone for a long time."

Nick takes the basin to the kitchen while his father bends over to look at the woman, who is "quiet now" and apparently nearly unconscious, and then brags a little: "That's one for the medical journal, George. . . . Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders." A moment later he thinks to look at the baby's father.

"They're usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs," the doctor said. "I must say he took it all pretty quietly."
He pulled back the blanket from the Indian's head. His hand came away wet. He mounted on the edge of the lower bunk with the lamp in one hand and looked in. The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk. His head rested on his left arm. The open razor lay, edge up, in the blankets.
"Take Nick out of the shanty, George," the doctor said.
There was no need of that. Nick, standing in the door of the kitchen had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian's head back.
We are told nothing more about what happened until the father and son are walking back toward the lake in the early dawn, and the story concludes in this fashion.

“I’m terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie,” said his father, all his post-operative exhilaration gone. “It was an awful mess to put you through.”

“Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?” Nick asked.

“No, that was very, very exceptional.”

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

“I don’t know, Nick. He couldn’t stand things, I guess.”

“Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?”

“Not very many, Nick.”

“Do many women?”

“Hardly ever.”

“Don’t they ever?”

“Oh, yes. They do sometimes.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“Where did Uncle George go?”

“He’ll turn up all right.”

“Is dying hard, Daddy?”

“No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.”

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.

In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.

I hesitate to comment much upon so delicate and modest a transmutation of suffering and death into a conviction of personal immortality, except to say that I do not think there can be many readers who feel other than affection toward the boy or would want to point out to so young a child how far he had turned from the suffering of others toward self-enchantment. The impact of the final sentence depends, of course, upon our remembering the screams and the bloody throat and upon our knowledge that the boy, like all of us, must die. And if we have come to the story in its context in the collection of stories In Our Time, we cannot have forgotten the screams and dead mothers and babies that fill the preceding
story, “On the Quai at Smyrna,” one of Hemingway’s most gruesome renderings of human savagery and anguish. But the irony falls lightly. The weight of our attention at the end is mostly upon the boat and lake and bass and rising sun and rowing father, and upon that still hopeful child. Surely our wish is that while he is growing up, he will be able as much as possible to keep that unhappy episode out of his mind, will, in Auden’s or Eliot’s terms, remain somewhat hard of hearing.

When I think of that story, however, I usually think of another young man about whom I feel quite differently, Ivan Velikopolsky, in Chekhov’s “The Student.” This young man is twenty-two.

Ivan, “the son of a sacristan, and a student of the clerical academy,” is returning home from a day of shooting in the forest and begins to feel cold and gloomy as the good weather gives way to an unusually chilly evening. It seems to him that the cold “had destroyed the order and harmony of things, that nature itself felt ill at ease,” and he remembers that as he left his house his mother was sitting barefoot on the floor in the entry, cleaning the samovar, while his father lay on the stove coughing; as it was Good Friday nothing had been cooked, and the student was terribly hungry. And now shrinking from the cold, he thought that just such a wind had blown in the time of Ivan the Terrible and Peter, and in their time there had been just the same desperate poverty and hunger, the same thatched roofs with holes in them, ignorance, misery, the same desolation around, the same darkness, the same feeling of oppression—all these had existed, did exist, and would exist, and after the lapse of a thousand years would make life no better.

On his way, still three miles from home, he stops to warm himself by a campfire at the “widows’ gardens,” so named because they were kept by two widows, a mother and daughter. “The widow Vasilisa, a tall, fat old woman in a man’s coat was standing by and looking thoughtfully into the fire; her daughter Lukerya, a little pock-marked woman with a stupid-looking face, was sitting on the ground, washing a caldron and spoons.” Lukerya is further described as a
woman "who had been crushed by her husband" and as staring silently at the student with "a strange expression like that of a deaf mute."

Vasilisa and the student chat for a few moments, and the student, who is warming his hands at the fire, comments that the Apostle Peter had warmed himself "at just such a fire . . . so it must have been cold then, too. Ah, what a terrible night it must have been, granny! An utterly dismal long night!" Then obviously carried away by the analogy, the student goes on to elaborate:

"If you remember at the Last Supper Peter said to Jesus, I am ready to go with thee into darkness and unto death. And our Lord answered him thus: I say unto thee, Peter, before the cock croweth thou wilt have denied Me thrice. . . . Then you heard how Judas the same night kissed Jesus and betrayed him to his tormentors. They took Him bound to the high priest and beat Him, while Peter, exhausted, worn out with misery and alarm, hardly awake, you know, feeling that something awful was just going to happen on earth, followed behind. . . . He loved Jesus passionately, intensely, and now he saw from far off how He was beaten. . . ."

Lukerya left the spoons and fixed an immovable stare upon the student.

"They came to the high priest's," he went on; "they began to question Jesus, and meantime the labourers made a fire in the yard as it was cold, and warmed themselves. Peter, too, stood with them near the fire and warmed himself as I am doing."

The student goes on to describe how Peter was questioned about his connection with Christ by a woman and the laborers around the fire and three times denied any acquaintance with him, and concludes his story:

"And immediately after that time the cock crowed, and Peter, looking from afar off at Jesus, remembered the words He had said to him in the evening . . . [and] went out of the yard and wept bitterly—bitterly. In the Gospel it is written: 'He went out and wept bitterly.' I imagine it: the still, still, dark, dark, garden, and in the stillness, faintly audible, smothered sobbing. . . ." (ellipses all in the original)

After these words "the student sighed and sank into thought." Vasilisa "suddenly gave a gulp, big tears flowed
freely down her cheeks, and she screened her face from the
fire with her sleeve as though ashamed of her tears, and
Lukerya, staring immovably at the student, flushed crimson,
and her expression became strained and heavy like that of
someone enduring intense pain.”

Without further words, the student says good-night to the
widows and walks on in the darkness and cold. As he walks
along, he thinks about Vasilisa and muses that “since she had
shed tears all that had happened to Peter the night before the
crucifixion must have some relation to her” and he goes on to
expand that thought:

If Vasilisa had shed tears, and her daughter had been troubled, it
was evident that what he had been telling them about, which had
happened nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present—
to both women, to the desolate village, to himself, to all people.
The old woman had wept, not because he could tell the story
touchingly, but because Peter was near to her, because her whole
being was interested in what was passing in Peter’s soul.
And joy suddenly stirred in his soul, and he even stopped for a
minute to take breath. “The past,” he thought, “is linked with the
present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of
another.” And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of
that chain; that when he touched one end the other quivered.

As he continues toward home, his elation continues to
grow and the story concludes:

. . . He thought that truth and beauty which had guided human
life there in the garden and in the yard of the high priest had con­tinued without interruption to this day, and had evidently always
been the chief thing in human life and in all earthly life, indeed;
and the feeling of youth, health, vigour—he was only twenty­
two—and the inexpressible sweet expectation of happiness, of
unknown mysterious happiness, took possession of him little by
little, and life seemed to him enchanting, marvellous, and full of
lofty meaning.

I have taught this story many times, usually to students just
two or three years younger than the one in the story, and I
have always been surprised at how sympathetically they have
viewed him and at how much they resist my judgment of him,
which is very harsh. I cannot forget, as he does, his earlier sense of the endless continuum of “desperate poverty and hunger, the same thatched roofs with holes in them, ignorance, misery, the same desolation around, the same darkness, the same feeling of oppression.” Even if I attribute some of the gloominess of that portrait to the same youthful exaggeration that informs his final elation, there is enough depiction of pain and poverty within the story to attest to its essential truth: his barefoot mother, his coughing father, the two widowed women, one in a man’s coat, the other, “pock-marked,” “stupid looking,” “crushed by her husband,” “the desolate village” (still described as desolate just as he begins his joyful epiphany), the “cruel wind.” Nor can I forget the image of Lukerya at the end of the story of Peter, sitting on the ground “staring immovably at the student,” “her face flushed crimson,” her expression “strained and heavy like that of someone enduring intense pain.” Nor the image of Peter weeping “bitterly—bitterly,” and again “bitterly.” I do not think the student is right that the old woman had wept “because Peter was near to her, because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter’s soul.” It seems more likely she wept in some far more complex response to the full story, including the agony of Jesus and Peter’s denial of Him, and from some deeper sense of the relation of the two gardens. If she identified with anyone, it would hardly be with Peter, who stood by the fire warming himself as the student was doing, but with the laborers and the woman who noted that Peter had been with Jesus and who heard him deny it. I cannot help noticing also that the student has not only identified himself explicitly with Peter but focuses his story not on the suffering of Jesus but on the plight of “poor Peter,” “exhausted, worn out with misery and alarm,” “confused,” finally weeping “bitterly—bitterly.” His rhetoric is all reserved for Peter: “I imagine it, the still, still, dark, dark garden, and in the stillness, faintly audible smothered sobbing...” Can one escape thinking that the student is another Peter, denying both the suffering of Christ and the suffering immediately surrounding him? But worse than Peter, who at least weeps
bitterly over his betrayal, the student becomes joyful. He feels so full of exultation at the chain of connection between past and present that he has set quivering, that he can turn all the suffering and tears, in both gardens, into truth and beauty and think that such truth and beauty "which had guided human life there in the garden and in the yard of the high priest had continued without interruption to this day, and had evidently always been the chief thing in human life, and in all earthly life, indeed." Indeed! And finally, having so manipulated Christ and Peter and the two widows, he can go toward home with a "feeling of youth, health, and vigor," an "inexpressible sweet expectation of happiness," and a sense that life is "enchanting, marvellous, and full of lofty meaning." Finally, I cannot forget that the boy is a student at the clerical academy who has spent most of that day, Good Friday, shooting. Little in the story suggests he will mature into anything other than one more clergyman who spends his life denying Christ.

I know I am being too hard on the young man, for although the story itself allows and even encourages my reading of it, it does not support my angry judgmental tone. In a sense I am responding to the story as though it had ended with a final paragraph that read something like this:

Back in the garden the two widows huddled closer to their fire, which no longer gave much warmth against the growing bitterness of the wind. Vasilisa still sobbed from time to time as though the weight of her own and Jesus’ burden had somehow come together in her heart, and the expression on Lukerya’s pockmarked face remained as it had been when the student left them, strained and heavy like that of someone enduring intense pain.

Chekhov is far more tolerant, or at least charitable, for not only does he do nothing in the last two paragraphs to remind us of the suffering the student has left behind, both in actuality and in his mind, he inserts into his final sentence the kindly "he was only twenty-two."

Should I not, then, at least feel something of the sympathy I feel for Nick Adams and be glad that Ivan too can throw off
the weight of suffering in favor of the sense of his own youth, health, and vigor. I wish I could, and think I should, especially because I am, in effect, accusing him of indifference to suffering and yet wishing, myself, that he was suffering more. Yet I cannot overcome my harsher view of him. That is partly because twenty-two does not seem quite so young an age, partly because, unlike Nick Adams, he has manipulated the suffering and sufferers, and partly because he is so profoundly oblivious to the facile movements of his own consciousness. Nor can I keep myself from inflict- ing my view upon my students, and thereby darkening a bit perhaps their youthful optimism and happy forgetfulness of suffering.

And I cannot keep from briefly presenting here another vision that Chekhov offers for our contemplation, that of Ivan Ivanych in “Gooseberries.” This Ivan is an elderly veterinarian who over the years has become so horrified by his brother’s piggish and blind complacency that he becomes incapable of watching anyone’s happiness without an “oppressive feeling bordering on despair.” After spending an evening with his brother, he says to himself:

How many contented, happy people there really are! What an overwhelming force they are! Look at life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, horrible poverty everywhere, overcrowding, degeneration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying—Yet in all the houses and on all the streets there is peace and quiet; of the fifty thousand people who live in our town there is not one who would cry out, who would vent his indignation aloud. We see the people who go to market, eat by day, sleep by night, who babble nonsense, marry, grow old, good-naturedly drag their dead to the cemetery, but we do not see or hear those who suffer, and what is terrible in life goes on somewhere behind the scenes. Everything is peaceful and quiet and only mute statistics protest: so many people gone out of their minds, so many gallons of vodka drunk, so many children dead from malnutrition—And such a state of things is evidently necessary; obviously the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy ones bear their burdens in silence, and if there were not this silence, happiness would be impossible. It is a general hypnosis. Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws, and
troubles will come to him—illness, poverty, losses, and then no one will see or hear him, just as now he neither sees nor hears others. But there is no man with a hammer. The happy man lives at his ease, faintly fluttered by small daily cares, like an aspen in the wind—and all is well.¹⁰

Ivan has been saying all this in a comfortable sitting room to his friends Burkin, a high school teacher, and Alyohin, a gentleman farmer, and he goes on to lament that he is an old man now, unfit for action, capable only of grieving inwardly, becoming irritated, and lying awake at night with his thoughts. "Oh, if I were young!" he exclaims several times, pacing up and down the room excitedly, and then pressing Alyohin's hands, he implores him not to let himself "be lulled to sleep! As long as you are young, strong, alert, do not cease to do good! There is no happiness and there should be none, and if life has a meaning and a purpose, that meaning and purpose is not our happiness but something greater and more rational. Do good!" All this he says "with a pitiful, imploring smile, as though he were asking a personal favor." The story does not report how Alyohin receives this plea; it ends with the three men sitting for awhile in silence and then going off to bed.

As always in Chekhov, there is much that complicates our response—both to Ivan and his point of view. Among other things, he more than anyone else in the story seems able to enjoy life and even to sleep well (if I read the end of the story correctly); and the story itself suggests there is much in life, including the lovely maid Pelageya, to be enjoyed. At the same time, Ivan's vision is never deeply undermined; and near the very end of the story, Chekhov compels us to measure our response against that of Alyohin, who "did not trouble to ask himself if what Ivan Ivanych has just said was intelligent or right" and who is pleased because Ivan was "not talking about groats or hay, or tar, but about something that had no direct bearing on his life."

I myself have no settled response to the story. At times Ivan's seems a silly view to take. How absurd to be pained by the sight of a happy man or happy families because others are
suffering, especially if, as is true in Ivan’s case, one has no clear idea of what to do about the suffering. How futile to implore the sleepy and uncomprehending Alyohin merely to “Do good!” How dangerously the vision veers away from a concern with the plight of the sufferers toward a wish to inflict pain on those who ignore it, a wish that “behind the door of every contented, happy man” there would be someone with a hammer “continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people” (emphasis mine), as though the discomfort alone were of value.

Yet how close or loud must the suffering be for happiness to be properly viewed as ugly or inappropriate. Only within eyesight or earshot? Only when it occurs within our own family, or town, or neighboring town? Only when it has not happened behind our backs, which after all are always turned toward some victim, intentionally or otherwise? Only when we witness the crucifixion? Shall we say that we ought not be troubled by suffering unless we know how to alleviate it or can make some effort to do so? And if we once begin to take on others’ pain, when, where, and for what reasons shall we stop short of taking on the pain of the whole world? Obviously these are not directly answerable questions, but they help account for an obsession like Ivan’s and for my own compulsion to become that someone with a hammer as I urge my own students to question the happiness of Chekhov’s young student and remind them of the suffering he has forgotten, and as I write this book. I say not directly answerable because I like to think that the effort we are engaged in here may be a way of answering as well as asking.

Such questions also help account, though by no means entirely, for the behavior of another young man on Good Friday whose story takes us deep into the labyrinths that open for those who are perhaps insufficiently wadded against pain. He appears in a story by James Agee, who will appear quite frequently in these pages and who eventually will help bring them to an end.

The protagonist of this story, or short novel, The Morning Watch, is a twelve-year-old named Richard who is a student
at a religious boarding school. It is a school very much like the one Agee attended, just as the boy is quite obviously patterned after the youthful Agee himself. Most of the story takes place between the hours of about three-thirty and dawn on Good Friday, and it is almost entirely concerned with Richard’s determined and self-conscious efforts during those hours to maintain an acute and proper consciousness of Christ’s sufferings during those same hours. He finds this very difficult because his mind keeps wandering: into a concern with his own physical and spiritual state and with what the other boys are feeling and thinking and about his relation to them, into speculations about the meanings and associations of various words in the prayers, into memories of his father’s death, and above all, into prideful ruminations and fantasies. The story begins:

In hidden vainglory he had vowed that he would stay awake straight through the night, for he had wondered, and not without scorn, how they, grown men, could give way to sleep on this night of all the nights in their life, leaving Him without one friend in His worst hour; but some while before midnight, still unaware that he was so much as drowsy, he had fallen asleep; and now this listening sleep was broken and instantly Richard lay sharp awake, aware of his failure and of the night.¹¹

The failure is particularly upsetting to him because throughout the nearly forty days of Lent although “he had not managed perfectly to keep either his public or his secret Lenten Rules . . . he had been sufficiently earnest and faithful, and sufficiently grieved in his failures” that his feeling about the Passion had grown deeper and more rewarding than he had ever known before, and he was now coming into the heart of it “with heart and soul prepared and eager” (p. 29).

Lying in bed, he imagines deeply what Christ had already undergone in those hours while he slept and is yet to undergo; and for the first of many times, we watch him chastise himself: “Could ye not watch with me one hour? No Lord, his humbled soul replied: not even one: and three times, silently gazing straight upward into darkness he struck his breast while tears of contrition, of humility and of a hunger to be
worthy, solaced his eyes, and awakened his heart” (p. 22). He continues to envision the events leading up to the Crucifixion: Christ standing “peaceful before Pilate, the one calm and silence amid all that tumult of malice and scorn and guile and hatred,” Peter “in fury and in terror” denying his Lord, “the bitter terrible weeping . . . soon now the sentence and the torment, the scourging, the mocking robe, the wreathed, wretched Crown: King of the Jews.” And he prays silently, “in solemn and festal exaltation”: “‘O God . . . make me to know thy suffering this day. O make me to know Thy dear Son’s suffering this day’” (pp. 22–23).

Meanwhile, “by a habit of their own” his hands have been searching and testing his sheet, and he is relieved to discover that he had wet his bed so little that by morning nobody would know. He then becomes occupied with the events in the dormitory as Father Whitman awakens Hobe and Jimmy, the other boys who are scheduled, as he is, for the four o’clock watch. These events include some unselfconscious cursing by the other boys (“Quit it you God damn—”; “Yeah fer Chrise sakes shut up”; “God All Mighty Christ, can’t even wake nobody up in this friggin school—”) in which Richard is, at first, glad he has not participated and then uneasy because “that was like being thankful you were not as other men and that was one of the worst sins of all; the Pharisee” (pp. 25–33). As the boys walk down the stairs, Richard, “by trying hard . . . was able to restore whole to his mind the thorn-crowned image of his Lord” but it was not “very little different from a pious painting he knew: the eyes rolled up in a way that seemed affected, and . . . the image meant little to him” (p. 31).

In the chapel he struggles, not very successfully at first, to focus his mind upon his religious duties but finally begins to pray with considerable seriousness, thinking carefully of each word. He manages reasonably well to control his usual ruminations over the word *inebriate* in “Blood of Christ inebriate me” and somewhat less well the literal and sexual images generated by “within His wounds hide me” and then falls into lengthy introspection over “that with Thy Saints I may praise
Thee” and “the burden of [my iniquities] is intolerable,” neither of which he is ever able to say with what he considers adequate sincerity. “It wasn’t anywhere near intolerable, no matter how much it ought to be,” he thinks and wonders “how can you say things when you only ought to mean them and don’t really mean them at all” (p. 59). With respect to saintliness, his problem is more serious and complex (as it is for Agee throughout his life and as it is in the general realm this book is exploring).

At first he thinks “it was wrong for people to ask to be saints. . . . Or even just to be with the saints, if that was what it meant. To just barely manage through God’s infinite mercy to escape burning eternally in the everlasting fires of Hell ought to be as much as any good Catholic could pray for” (p. 58). Then it occurs to him that perhaps “this prayer had been written by a saint or by someone near sainthood, who was able to mean every extreme thing that was said. . . . But in that case it was a prayer which was good only for saints and near saints to say, not for ordinary people, no matter how good they hoped to be. Nobody’s got any business even hoping he can be a saint, he told himself” (p. 60). Upon thinking this, he remembers with terrible shame that he himself had for a while cherished exactly that “inordinate ambition” and “with a cold and marvelling, compassionate contempt for the child he had so recently been,” he loses himself in memories and thoughts about his quest of a little over a year before “when he was only eleven.”

This section of the story is worth reporting in considerable detail, for better than any other account I know, it renders the kind of adolescent state of consciousness that both generates, and remains embedded within, some of the more interesting adult sensibilities that take special cognizance of human suffering. It is a state of peculiar susceptibility nourished by loneliness, in which pride and humility, self-infatuation and self-loathing, compassion and self-pity, the desire to be truly worthy and childish dreams of glory, self-knowledge and self-deception, mix with one another in an amazing bath of yearning, fear, and fervor. I want to linger here, also, because
I think that the adult Agee, in the final fullness and failure of his achievement, may represent the farthest a twentieth-century writer may travel toward saintliness without denying the complexities he has acquired through being a creature of his own time.

For the eleven-year-old Richard, it was a state in which the image and meaning of Jesus and the power and meaning of the Sacraments and of the teachings of the church, all embodied and set forth in formalities of language and of motion whose sober beauties were unique, and in a music which at the time moved and satisfied him as no other could, had first and, it had seemed irreducibly, established upon his heart and mind their quality, their comfort, their nobility, their sad and soaring weight; and entering upon his desolation of loneliness, had made of suffering a springing garden, an Eden in which to walk, enjoying the cool of the evening. It had become a secret kind of good to be punished, especially if the punishment was exorbitant or unjust; better to be ignored by others, than accepted; better still to be humiliated, than ignored. (P. 61)

Now, kneeling in the chapel, he remembers how he had pretended not to know his lessons in order that his teachers might think ill of him; how he had abandoned his solitary wanderings in the woods when it had occurred to him that “for all their solitude and melancholy” they were more pleasant than unpleasant; how he would sing “Jesus, I my Cross have taken . . . already anticipating the lonely solace of tears concealed in public” (pp. 62–63) and “all to leave and follow thee; destitute, despis’d, forsaken; thou from hence my All shalt be” feeling “nobody else wants me” and doing “his best to believe it, even of his mother” (p. 63); and how he had even worked “to intensify his always all but annihilating homesickness” (p. 64) by asking permission to visit his mother when he knew it would be refused and had sometimes spent hours watching his mother’s cottage “relishing the fact that only he knew of the miserableness of that watch” (p. 64).

During Lent of that year, he had experimented with extra fasting, and when that proved nearly impossible in the school dining room, he had tried self-mortification instead:
He had gone into the woods and eaten worms, but this had dis­
gusted him, and he had been even more disgusted when, on one
occasion, he had come near tasting his own excrement. It had
suddenly struck him as very doubtful indeed that Jesus would ever
have done any such thing, and he had thrown the twig deep into
the bushes and had carefully buried the filth. Efforts to scourge
himself had been moderately painful but not sufficiently effective
to outweigh the sense of bashfulness, even of ridiculousness,
which he felt over the clumsiness of the attempt, in relation to the
severity of the intention. So he had been reduced, mainly, to keep­
ing very bitter vigil over his thoughts and his language and over his
sensuous actions upon himself, and to finding out times and
places in which it would be possible to kneel, for much longer
than it was comfortable to kneel, without danger of getting
caught at it. (Pp. 68–69)

During one such episode on his knees, while “absorbed in
grateful and overwhelmed imagination of Christ Crucified”
and sincerely wondering how he could ever do enough for
Christ who had done so much for him, he suddenly supplants
Christ’s image with his own and “saw his own body nailed to
the Cross and, in the same image, himself looked down from
the Cross and felt his weight upon the nails, and the splin­
tered wood against the whole length of his scourged back;
and stoically, with infinite love and forgiveness, gazed down­
ward into the eyes of Richard, and of Roman soldiers, and of
jeering Jews, and of many people whom Richard had
known” (p. 70).

In the very act of remembering these past vanities with
“affectionate scorn,” the twelve-year-old Richard drifts into
somewhat comic musings about the difficulties he might have
if he actually tried to nail himself to a cross and then into
images of himself tied to a cross made of one of the school’s
gridiron bedsteads while his mother and various teachers and
students and finally nearly everyone in the community watch
him with amazement and respect.

Upon realizing this new “contemptible silliness,” Richard
feels an “insupportable self-loathing” and, “scarcely knowing
his action, struck himself upon his breastbone, groaning
within his soul, the burden of them is intolerable.” With this
he realizes “in gratitude and a new flowering of vainglory, that he had been surprised into contrition so true and so deep that beside it every moment of contrition he had ever known before seemed trivial, and even false, and for an instant he questioned the validity of every Absolution he had ever been granted.” In a moment, however, he finds himself worrying about whether his action of striking his breast was noticed and would be thought affected, and drifts into speculations about the sincerity, affectedness, and self-consciousness of another boy kneeling in front of him who seems to be praying with peculiarly visible intensity and physical posturings. When he returns, again with a new contrition, from these musings, he wonders “whether he would ever learn, from committing one sin, how not to commit another of the same sort even in the very moment of repenting it; and he felt that it was strange, and terrible, that repentence so deep and real as he knew that his had been, could be so fleeting” (p. 82).

As one might expect, he does not learn; and his struggle with his egotism, his wandering mind, and self-consciousness goes on and on until once again, after having forced himself to kneel painfully throughout the second watch, he succeeds in vividly imagining the moment of crucifixion:

one hand, against splintering wood, and the point of a spike against the center of the open hand, and a great hammer, and the spike being driven through, breaking a bone, tight into the wood so that the head was all buried in the flesh and the splintered bone, and then to be able to say, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. And that’s just one hand, he reminded himself. How about both hands. And both feet. Specially both feet crossed on each other and one spike through both insteps. How about when they raise up the Cross with you on it and drop it deep in the hole they dug for it! And imagining that moment he felt a tearing spasm of anguish in the center of each palm and with an instant dazzling of amazed delight, remembering pictures of great saints, shouted within himself, I’ve got the wounds! and even as he caught himself opening his palms and his eyes to peer and see if this were so he realized that once again this night, and even more blasphemously and absurdly than before, he had sinned in the proud imagination of his heart. O my God, his heart moaned, O my God! My God how can You forgive me! (Pp. 106–7)
After this new self-betrayal and a few last minor lapses into pride over his own contrition, he feels a dry, tired, and quiet emptiness in which he is able to pray and to think of the sacrifice of Jesus with a humble sorrow. At a few minutes after five, he leaves the chapel “light and uneasy and at peace within. There was nothing to do or think or say” (p. 120).

Oh my! It is hard to decide how much to pity Richard for the awful burden he has of carrying such a consciousness and how much to envy him the richness of the internal drama of which he is participant and observer, how much to feel as does the woman narrator of Doris Lessing’s Memoirs of a Survivor, how terrible it is to be young, and how much to mourn the loss of such wonderful youthful intensity that so often comes with age.

In some respects, of course, Richard’s dreams of glory are not unlike those of any other child who wants to emulate some heroic figure (Sir Lancelot, Robin Hood, Joan of Arc, John Wayne, Superman, or Kojak) whose exploits seem to have impressed the world, and thereby to appear worthy in his own eyes and to astound his elders. Even the imaginary and actual subjection of the self to pain and ignominy is a common enough part of such fantasies, for somehow the human psyche very early learns to define full triumph in relation to the ordeal undergone in attaining it. (No doubt it is partly this that has made Christ so attractive an image, for apart from anything else, He emerges triumphant after an ordeal that is not only death-defying in all the usual senses but includes the infliction of death itself.)

At the same time, Richard’s effort is riddled with special problems and paradoxes that set it apart. His real or deepest quest is to prove himself worthy in his own eyes, and such worthiness as he has defined it must include a conscious humbling of himself that takes no pride or satisfaction in that effort or achievement, an effort toward saintliness that cannot permit the presumption that it is such an effort, and an effort to imagine as fully as possible the suffering of Christ without feeling himself to be like Christ, to put himself in Christ’s shoes, so to speak, without wearing them. The first
two dilemmas, I suppose, could be termed occupational diseases of sainthood and the continual wrestling with them a lifelong obligation of all but the least self-conscious saints. I put it in this mildly flippant way not to belittle the seriousness or validity of such concerns (occupational diseases, whether black lung disease, ulcers, or boredom, are serious matters) but because they are concerns that are directed at self-definition rather than at the fate of others. The third dilemma seems more desperate, for it may be the most insidious problem of any serious effort to apprehend the predicament of another person. It is, after all, precisely at the moment when Richard has brought himself to the fullest and most immediate imagining of the Crucifixion—the spikes being driven through both of Christ's hands and both of his feet, breaking the bones, and the pain "when they raise up the Cross with you on it and drop it deep into the hole they dug for it" (pp. 106-7)—that he feels "a tearing spasm of anguish" in the center of each of his own palms and slips again into the arrogance and blasphemy of imagining his own sainthood. It is insidious not so much because of that final vainglorious slip (which anyone can outgrow) but because of the nearly inevitable way in which any truly intense apprehension of another's suffering must be experienced as a movement within the self. In taking on the pain of another, we cannot help but make it our pain. And our pain hurts us. This is obviously a special problem for writers, and readers too, and we shall have to ask eventually whether any act of imaginative seizure—indeed, any act of empathy—can avoid some such inflammation of the self, especially if it occurs in conjunction with the view that one is obligated to feel discomfort as a validation of one's sympathy.

A further terrible question is whether anyone afflicted with a truly intense quest to be worthy can attend to any of his other tasks with the same devotion he gives to measuring his degree of success in that endeavor. Richard pleads with God: "Let me not feel good when I am good. Let me just try to be good, don't let me feel good. Don't let me even know if I'm good" (p. 110). And yet a moment later, he feels a pride about
this new humility and then new shame at that pride. What is quite obviously at stake is his own worthiness. Perhaps it is to avoid such a dilemma that some saintly beings have chosen a strictly ordered seclusion in which to perform solely for God.

Like Ivan Ivanych in "Gooseberries," and utterly unlike the young Ivan in "The Student," Richard is thoroughly convinced that any proper response to the suffering of another must involve an appreciable discomfort of one's own, and even more, that one's degree of concern is to be measured by that same discomfort. (And as is no doubt clear, I myself am not immune to such a notion.) Though it is a strange notion in many respects, and, as we have seen and will continue to see, it can lead to all sorts of foolishness and self-indulgence, it must also be an enormously compelling and understandable one, or else the image of the crucified Jesus could not have done the work it has or even begun to compete with the image of the gentle nursing madonna or the scales of justice. Or perhaps it is merely that we know a good deal about the behavior of those who seem to feel no discomfort at all about the suffering of others. Or perhaps, like Proust, when we "have had occasion to meet with, in convents, for instance, literally saintly examples of practical charity, they have generally had the brisk, decided, undisturbed, and slightly brutal air of a busy surgeon, the face in which one can discern no commiseration, no tenderness at the sight of suffering humanity, and no fear of hurting it, the face devoid of gentleness or sympathy, the sublime face of true goodness."13

It is time though to look at some less comforting examples of those who do not turn leisurely away from the suffering.