

## ON DEFEAT

When Fortuna spurs on her wheel, the fates resting atop must descend, while those pressed into the dust are raised upwards again. Up and down, up and down. Fortuna goes about her business in the realm of the generic – the fates come from the generic and roll towards the generic. Yet one defeat is not identical to the next, to say nothing of what each defeat gives rise to.

I would like to call upon two specialists in defeat, two great men of suffering, casting long shadows into our own times, utterly different in their characters and their actions: Job and Jesus. Job, who wants the day of his birth erased, who screams out his grievance with vigour, who insists on his innocence against all objections and thus posits the question of God's earthly justice in such sharp focus that God himself is coaxed into a response; Jesus, the character who voluntarily abandons his high status in favour of humiliation, at the most bitter point of which all certainty of resurrection collapses, whereupon he speaks the despondent words – *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me* – these are the role models that show that the charisma of appalling defeat can give rise to an astoundingly different state of being. Job dies at an old age, sated on life, his innocence confirmed by God; Jesus has the pleasure of resurrection and is gradually transfigured into the great heavenly magnet of the Christian world.

No late triumph during this lifetime or beyond this mortal existence was granted to the head of the High Command of the Wehrmacht, Wilhelm Bodewin Keitel, who signed the second unconditional German surrender – on camera – on the night of the 8th/9th of May in Berlin-Karlshorst. In the days when the German-Russian Museum in Berlin was still in Soviet hands, a highly decorated Russian woman in uniform led visitors into a large hall with tables and chairs arranged in a horseshoe, exactly as they may have stood in 1945, even with a few items of thick-shelled crockery from the old days on the front tables. At the front of the room the obligatory Soviet and GDR flags, between them a large film screen. On that screen Keitel appeared,

once again at the front of the same hall, now filled to bursting point, surrounded by high-ranking officers of the Allied armed forces.

The heavy-set man was giving off steam. Trembling with rage, his thick fingers clutched the fountain pen so tightly that the nib sheer broke off; the signature was more hacked into the paper than written. Cut. A hanged Keitel with a swollen tongue. Keitel collapsed prone in a corner. The Russian woman's pointer tapped, as if she wanted to give him one final punishing blow, against his wrecked face. The man was executed in Nuremberg in 1946. No restitution, no resurrection, merely total moral defeat and nothing else.

The Japanese writer Yukio Mishima imposed a foolish, risible and extremely painful defeat upon himself by slitting open his stomach on the 25th of November 1970. This deed was planned as a great symbol of triumph; it was to serve the cause of reinstating the monarchy. Everything went wrong. With his companions, Mishima broke into the command headquarters of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces, taking hostages and holding a passionate speech from the balcony – which, once the initial amazement had died down, was greeted with laughter and jeering. *Go on then, do it!* shouted the crowd below. Mishima withdrew from the balcony and did it, badly. His hand could not summon up the necessary resolution for the cut. The companion assigned with chopping off his head dealt too weak a blow and failed to sever it in one go. In short, the result was a multitude of slits and chops and blows, which lacked the resoluteness and elegance Mishima had so deeply desired. The word *elegance* may appear strange in conjunction with protruding innards, yet before he put an end to his life Mishima was utterly convinced that this very way of dying was like no other *many, unconditional* and above all: *elegant*.

His end may have been ignominious, yet we still have Mishima's works at least, anchored in the memory of the reading population to this day.

The defeats in Klagenfurt – *naturally enough*, as Thomas Bernhard liked to say – are of modest proportions by contrast. I am not aware that anyone has ever committed murder after receiving the judgements, having previously appealed to the public in a pamphlet craving revenge, demanding a general reversal. We live in mild times, thank the lord. The critics express their aversions in tones rather more

dour than severe, shying away from the responsibility of perhaps crushing a soul. And the maligned candidates do not generally talk back – at most a twitch of an eyelid or a cheek muscle out of control signify their mortification – most of them have trained themselves to be untouchable, a layer pulled like a glove over their entire person that lets barely a trace of their inner tumult, their piercing screams of indignation, penetrate to the outside world. As I said a moment ago, we live in mild times, compelled to pretend to one another by turns that everything is merely a game. Nevertheless, for anyone used to hearing only lukewarm encouragement from the cradle to the grave that everything he paints, scribbles and chants is creative and good, even the Klagenfurt measure of rebuke will be a major blow.

The complicated aspect of the victories and defeats in this room, however, is that mistakes happen, as they do in all human undertakings. Thus, a good few times victors have been proclaimed who proved to be non-starters within the following few years; many a candidate, in contrast, who did not come off particularly well, now has a decent body of work to his name that has brought great respect. Should he have the stuff to become a veritable writer, a defeat suffered here will not lead the candidate astray, or at most will throw him off track for a few – possibly beneficial – months and teach him a lesson that we may hope will fortify his character anew through productive insight into his own deficiencies, once he escapes the hubbub of defiance, anger and depression.

Matters of character, incidentally, are the be all and end all in writing, and tend to be underestimated (a brief aside).

In general, writers are chimeric masters of the art of defeat rather than of victory. A writer who stumbled from one triumph to the next would be a deeply laughable character. Writers transform defeats – bodily illness, humiliating romantic rejection, dismal origins, material poverty, homelessness in the modern world and who knows what else – into sublime aesthetic rewards. No matter how lost a novel may appear in its join-the-dots ink: he who wrote it holds his head high and had his covert pleasure in the theatrical reanimation of his once-suffered pain.

And now I'm itching to introduce you to my favourite phantasmagoria. Oh gosh – I can't help hesitating – it really is too

silly. Like all fantasies draped around the fundamental, it is easy to see through. Lady Literature wants to send it packing to the realms of all or nothing, liberate it from the guilty pleasure of banality, allocate it a meaning that it does not have, perhaps never had. Significant events simply take place; they cannot be forced to happen through any elaborately imagined system (as I well know). Perhaps I am not so far away from Mishima's greed for finality in this fantasy; what distinguishes me from him, however, is a really rather cosy rational inhabitation of the world at my fingertips, as it reveals itself to me on a daily basis.

Enough already of the hedging preambles. Let us finally turn our eyes to the pipe dream I have heralded. It is of course a dream of a competition – a radical competition. A children's fairy tale run wild into megalomania has clamped itself piggyback onto the Klagenfurt poll. In *my* competition, which takes place only every ten years, I take part again but don't win. It is tuned absolutely to the decade. Over ten years, a search goes on for ten worthy poets and writers in the German language. (They are found.) Needless to add that only critics with sensitive ears, intelligence and integrity make up the jury.

Based entirely on the Klagenfurt model, the chosen ones are asked to read from their work for half an hour. There is a discussion, the winner is chosen. The nine losers are strangled.

Just imagine how unconditionally the candidates exert their efforts to give their utmost best. What a burden rests on the jurors' shoulders. And just imagine in what stance the jurors stride along the row of nine corpses, arranged neatly before them on the ground. Listen to the rustling of newspapers, the emotional radio speeches, see the beers raised in toasts around pub tables, feast your eyes on the outpourings of sympathy across Austria, Switzerland and Germany: nine men and women of letters, possibly at the peak of their prowess, robbed of their lives merely because they read a miniscule fraction less well than the winner in the incorruptible ears of the tribunal. Inconceivable – the burden on the winner. Will he break down? Will his work stand up to the horror for which he is partly responsible?

To a small sacrificial heap of nine noble losers? What a restitution and resurrection of writing and literature!

Back to the facts. Ladies and gentlemen candidates! I recommend to you, whose souls but not bodies are at threat, to receive the judgements with folded hands, or placing the palm of one hand against the other. Lower your heads ever so slightly. It is a stance of composed humility. No, it does not mean that you are praying. The intertwined fingers indicate merely that you are wholly aware of yourselves. Yet in this very position it is possible that one hair on your head might point boldly upwards, seeking straight for a nexus to heaven. So that everything that rains down on you in this earthly life may one day, when you are led before the highest judge and finally make acquaintance with yourselves, be transformed into a joy as immense as the heavens themselves.