At that very time I happened to be reading about the deaths of 340 Dutch Jews in the stone quarry at Mauthausen. On the arrival of the contingent, Ernstberger, the camp’s second officer, made it clear to political prisoner and block clerk Glas that the order was none of them should remain alive more than six weeks. Glas objected: he was sentenced to a beating of thirty lashes, then replaced by one of the criminals. The next day the Dutch Jews were herded off to the stone pit. Instead of using the 148 steps, hewn into the rock, which led down to the bottom, they were forced to slither their way down over the naked stone rubble of the precipitous rock walls. Down at the bottom boards were loaded on their shoulders, onto the boards, massive boulders, and they had to carry these at the double up to the top—albeit this time by way of the 148 steps of the stairway. At times the boulders would slide off the boards with the first few steps on the stairway, crushing the feet of those pressing behind. An accident meant a beating. Already on the first day a number of the Dutch Jews threw themselves into the stone pit from the edge of the rock face. Later on, groups of nine to twelve were to leap together, holding hands, into the chasm. The civilian employees at the quarry put in a complaint to the SS: the shreds of flesh and brain tissue which were clinging to the rocks, they objected, “afford too
gruesome a sight.” The rocks were hosed down by a labour squad with powerful water jets: from then onwards prisoner functionaries were posted to stand guard and deal out exemplary reprisals on further offenders. Death wishes, one might say, were here punishable by death. Any of them who did not wish to die with the rest were also killed. It took only three weeks, instead of six, to dispose of them.

I closed the book and put it aside with the feeling that this fact, which I came across at random among 400 pages of further facts (which in themselves are but a modest fraction of a complete list of facts which would take up who knows how many tens of thousands of pages), that these 340 deaths on the rocks, for instance, might rightly find a place among the symbols of the human imagination—but on one condition: only if they had not occurred. Since they did occur, it is hard even to imagine them. Rather than becoming a plaything, the imagination proves to be a heavy and immovable burden, just like those boulders in Mauthausen: people do not want to be crushed under them. That, however, leaves us at risk of falling behind our times: we live our lives without being enriched by the experiences of our era. Yet maybe, I pondered, it is the obsessive monotony of those experiences with which the imagination wrestles ineffectually. At the time I was reading a novel published under the title The Long Voyage, and in it came across Sigrid, the beautiful blond fashion model who, I read, was

…there only in order to make us forget the body and face of Ilse Koch, that straight, stocky body planted solidly on her straight, sturdy legs, that harsh, sharp, incontestably German face, those fair eyes, like Sigrid’s eyes (but neither the photographs nor the newsreels taken at the time,
and since used and re-used in certain films, enabled anyone to ascertain whether Ilse Koch’s fair eyes were green like Sigrid’s, or blue or light blue or iron gray—more likely iron gray), Ilse Koch’s eyes fixed on the naked torso, on the bare arms of the deportee she had chosen as her lover a few hours before, her gaze already cutting out that white, sickly skin along the dotted lines of the tattoo which had caught her attention, her gaze already picturing the handsome effect of those bluish lines, those flowers or sailing ships, those snakes, that seaweed, that long female hair, those pinks of the wind, those sea waves and those sailing vessels, again those sailing vessels deployed like screaming gulls, their handsome effect on the parchment-like skin—having, by some chemical process, acquired an ivory tint—of the lampshades covering every lamp in her living room where, at dusk, she had smiled at the deportee brought in first as the chosen instrument of pleasure, a twofold pleasure, first in the act of pleasure itself and then for the much more durable pleasure of his parchment-like skin, properly treated, the colour of ivory, crisscrossed by the bluish lines of the tattoo which gave the lampshade its inimitable stamp, there, reclining on a couch, she assembled the officers of the Waffen-SS about her husband, the Commandant of the camp, to listen to one of them play some romantic melody on the piano, or something serious from the piano repertory, a Beethoven concerto perhaps...

I stopped reading. There it was, blood, lust, and the demon encapsulated in a single figure, indeed, a single sentence. Even as I read, it offered definitive forms: I can fit them with no trouble at all into the ready-made toolbox of my historical imagination. A Lucrezia Borgia of Buchenwald; a great sinner, worthy of Dostoevsky’s pen, settling up with God; a female example of Nietzsche’s horde of splendid blond beasts, prowling about in search of spoils and victory, who “go back to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey…”

Yes, indeed yes, our thoughts are still held captive by the delusions of dove-conscience intellectuals, a more balanced era’s simple-minded visions of the daring grandeur of depravity, although they never pay the required attention to the details. There is some kind of unbridgeable discrepancy here: on the one hand, drunken paens to the first blush of dawn, a revaluation of all values, and a sublime immorality, and on the other, a trainload of human cargo which has to be disposed of as rapidly—and most likely as smoothly—as possible in gas chambers that never have enough capacity. What business does lacerated, devil-may-care intellectual toil have here? Too solitary, too fussy, too passive, too far-from-average, unherd-like, uncorporate—just too immoral: what is needed here is an ethic—a straightforward, easily understandable, readily usable work ethic. “And does Herr General Globocnik not think,’ ministerial counsellor Dr. Herbert Lindner poses the highly practical question to SS-Brigadeführer Globocnik, ‘that it would be more prudent to burn the corpses instead of burying them? Another generation might take a different view of these things!’ To which Globocnik replies, ‘Gentlemen, if there is ever a generation after so cowardly, so soft, that it would not understand our work as good and necessary, then, gentlemen, National Socialism will have been for nothing. On the contrary, we should bury bronze tablets, saying that it was we who had the courage to carry out this gigantic task!’”
Yes, I wove my thoughts further, maybe the demon is lurking hereabouts: not in the fact that man kills but that he proclaims its indispensable virtues into a world order of killing. I took down a documentary compendium from my bookshelf and leafed through it for a photograph of Ilse Koch. The face, though it may once have been steeled with a hint of female allure, was certainly here ordinary, sullen, doughy-skinned, piggish—quite incapable of convincing me that I was beholding a figure of a stature who was grand even in her excesses, someone who had transcended good and evil and whose life had run its course in terms of a ceaseless, implacable challenge which spurned all morality. For Ilse Koch had not, in truth, opposed a moral order; quite the contrary, she herself epitomized it—and that is a big difference. Nor did I find in that documentary compendium any evidence that she took a special pleasure in music—Beethoven in particular—or that she had given herself to prisoners. She picked her lovers from the staff—officers—the camp doctor, Dr. Hoven, nicknamed ‘Handsome Waldemar,’ and 88-Hauptssturmführer Florstedt—as befitted her logic. Manifestations of her inventiveness were restricted to customs that were practices of the time. Shrunken heads and decorative articles of tanned human skin ornamented the villas and office desks of many officers in Buchenwald, and Ilse Koch too possessed a number of these. Possibly more than others, but then that would only have been her right—after all, she was the camp commandant’s wife, the “Kommandeuse.” She generally owned more of everything than the wives of subordinates: bigger villa, more opulent household, more privileges. Giving free rein to her fantasy—bolstered by who knows what kinds of reading matter just a few years before, when she was just a stenographer in a tobacco and cigarette factory—took her as far as bathing in Madeira wine and having a riding hall of four-thousand-square-metres constructed for her own use, none of which bears the least stamp of a solitary moral renegade. It is unlikely it ever crossed her mind that if there was no God, then everything was permitted; on the contrary, she needed a god above all else—more specifically a god who would set down in writing everything that he permitted her. Indisputably, the moral world order offered by Buchenwald was one of murder; but it was a world order, and that was good enough for her. She never went beyond the bounds of its logic: where murder is a commonplace, a person becomes a murderer out of zealotry, not revolt. Killing can become just as much a virtue as not killing. The spectacle of so many corpses, and so much torture, no doubt had its reward, now and then, in an exceptional moment of elation about existing, and simultaneous gratitude and pride in service.

But wasn’t that its function? I continued to brood. Is it not possible that a predetermined state of affairs—the state of affairs of a camp commandant’s wife—goes together with, so to say, predetermined feelings and actions that are prescribed in advance? That one and the same state of affairs—give or take a little, perhaps—could have been filled by essentially anybody else with similar feelings and actions, or would that person suddenly find himself in some other, likewise ready-made state of affairs, like political prisoner Glas, who was unwilling to conform to his state of affairs in 340 stony deaths, and for that reason ended up in a punishment brigade? One state of affairs created Buchenwald; Buchenwald—among numerous other states of affairs—created a state of affairs for the camp commandant’s wife;
that state of affairs created Ilse Koch who—let us put it this way—gave her life for that state of affairs, and thereby she too created Buchenwald, which now is no longer imagina-
ble without her. How many more states of affairs were there just in the totalitarian world of Buchenwald alone? I hardly dare pose the question that lurks, seemingly inescapably, in my mind: whose handiwork, in the end, were those skull paperweights, the lampshades and bookbindings of tanned human skin?

I laid Ilse Koch's photograph aside. I shall never know what she herself thought about her own life as 'Kommandeuse.' Since she kept silent about it, she barred herself from interpre-
tability. I shall not become acquainted with her mundane experiences and grey everyday among the bondsmen of murder. I shall be unable to discover whether it was libido or boredom, fulfilled ambition or irksome minor frustrations which preponderated in her emotional balance, unable to unravel her wholly personal neurosis, her compulsive psychosis—in a word, the secret of her personality.

I can view her as a humdrum sadist who found a home for herself in Buchenwald and was at last able to give free run to her repellant instincts. Or, if I want, I can also imagine her to have been a more complex being: perhaps she only tried to order her unexpected and incomprehensible state of affairs with even more unexpected and incomprehensible gestures simply to make it cosier, more habitable for herself, and see the proof, day by day, of how it is possible to live the unliveable, how natural the incredible...

None of this is a bit important. Ilse Koch fits a mean that can be extracted between her and her state of affairs, a formula in which she herself is not necessarily present. Yes, her character is only interpretable if we abstract her, look at her separately, so to say, from herself. The greater we imagine her significance, the more we downgrade what surrounded her: the reality of a world equipped for murder, because the essence that we would be attributing to her could only be abstracted by taking it from that reality.

Perhaps it is this, I speculated, this lack of essentiality, which is the tragedy. Except that, from another angle, this dashes to pieces any attempt at interpretation which insists on imposing figures. Because tragic figures live in a world of fate, and tragedy's perspective is infinity; the world of violence of totalitarian systems, by contrast, is a circumscribed and insuperable world, whereas their perspective is merely the historical time for which they happen to endure. How, then, could one hope to interpret an experience that cannot, and does not even wish to, transmute precisely as experience because the essence of their states of affairs—states of affairs that are at once all too abstract and all too concrete—is an inessential and at any time exchangeable figure which, in relation to the state of affairs, has no beginning, no continuation, and no analogy of any kind—and in relation to reason is thus improbable? Perhaps, I mused, one should construct a device, a revolving machine, a trap; the characters who fall into its grasp would scurry about ceaselessly, just like electronic mice, on tracks that look labyrinthine but are actually always unidirectional, pursued by a single automaton. Everything would be wobbling, rattling, everyone trampling on one another, until the machine suddenly explodes; then, after a pause for startled, dazed astonishment, they would all scatter in every direction. That still leaves the secret, figuring out the principle on which the machine operates, which is both too simple and too humiliating for them to listen to, and that is the mechanism for
the pursuing automaton utilizes the energy derived from their own rushing about...

But I had better break off here before my pen runs away with me, as they say. Why am I poking around, anyway, in those exercise books which I put aside long ago, that impressive-looking pile of dog-eared notes? Why am I copying out the outline of this never-to-be-completed essay? As a symptom, a characterisation of my state at the time. I had just then started to think these things over, but to publicize the mere fact that I was thinking had never even crossed my mind until then. Obviously, I had written my novel out of some sort of conviction, but not with any aim of convincing anyone about anything. I had written my comedies without any conviction at all, yet was paid money for them. But now a theoretical work: to pore over things, to form an opinion with knowing superiority and self-confidently step forward with that opinion—to do that I also had to possess the added conviction needed to convince others. And so I have to suppose that after finishing my novel some sort of change has taken place within me, or at least the proclivity for such a change was present within me.

Yes, carefully disguising my goal, bit by bit, cunningly and surreptitiously, I set about making definitive preparations for a delusion. I can discern a motive for it, in the end, if I think about it. Plainly, I wanted to forge some necessary consequence from a now irremediable act—the writing of a novel—that had swallowed up irreplaceable years of life, but meanwhile I had quite overlooked the possibility that my very uncertainties might have brought the novel itself into existence through me. I have the feeling I was almost beginning, at least secretly, to consider my destiny as a writer's destiny; even if I did not overtly reckon with it, I was almost
beginning to invest my thoughts with some kind of property which sustained an unconditional need for their communication by me and for their reception by others.

Who could know where all this would have led. During that period I may have felt myself ready to regard my future life as an inexhaustible source of ideas for public display; to set down the fruits of my reflections straightaway onto paper; to call on editorial offices and publishing houses with duplicate copies of this triumphant act; and to watch out for signs on people’s faces, or even in their lifestyle, of changes wrought by the influence of those ideas. Amidst a deafening fanfare of portentous pronouncements, authoritative views, and unappealable opinions, I too would have blown on my own toy trumpet. Once released on the mirror-smooth surface of paper, my hand would have glided at breakneck speed on the skate-blade of my ballpoint pen. I would have written as if I were seeking to avert a catastrophe—the catastrophe of not writing, obviously. In other words, I would have written for fear that, God forbid, I wouldn’t write; I would have written so as to kill every minute of time and to forget who I am: an end-product of determinacies, a maroon of contingencies, a martyr to bioelectronics, a reluctant surprised party to my own character.