

The Psyche

At dawn, in the red-tinted air, a large star shines, the brightest star of the morning; its rays quiver against the white wall as if it wanted to write down what it has to relate, what during thousands of years it has seen here and there in our turning world.

Listen to one of its stories.

Only recently – what it calls recently is centuries ago for us humans – my rays followed a young artist; it was in the *the Papal State*, in the great city of *Rome*. Much *there* has changed in the course of time, although not as rapidly as a human being changes from childhood to old age. The imperial palace was, as it still is, in ruins; fig trees and laurel trees grew among the collapsed columns and dotted across the ruined baths, their walls once resplendent with gold; the Colosseum was a ruin; the church bells rang, the scent of incense rose, processions through the streets took place with candles and glittering canopies. The Church was sacred, and art was respected and revered. The greatest painter in the world, *Raphael*, lived in *Rome*; here too lived the prime sculptor of the age, *Michelangelo*; even the Pope paid tribute to them, honoured them with visits; art was recognised, honoured and generously rewarded. But this does not mean that everything which is great and gifted is seen and known.

In a small, narrow street an old house stood that had once been a temple; here a young artist lived; he was poor, he was unknown; he had of course a few young friends, also artists, young in mind, in hope and in thought; they told him that he was rich in talent and skill, but that he was a fool since he never believed that himself. He always smashed what he had shaped out of clay, he was never satisfied, never finished anything, and one has to do that if it is to be seen, acknowledged and generate money.

'You are a dreamer!' they said, 'and that is your misfortune! but it stems from the fact you haven't lived yet, haven't tasted life, enjoyed it in large, healthy draughts, as it should be. And precisely in one's youth one can and must turn it and oneself into one entity, look at the great master, *Raphael*, whom the Pope honours, and the world admires, he lavishly helps himself to wine and bread!'

'And the baker's wife as well, the pretty *Fornarina!*' said *Angelo*, one of the merriest of his young friends.

Yes, they all said a great deal, according to their youth and understanding. They wanted to get the artist to join in their amusements, their wildness, their madness it can also be called; and at times he felt an urge to do so; he was hot-blooded, his imagination was fertile; he could take part in cheerful conversations, laugh aloud with the others; and yet what they called '*Raphael's merry life*' for him just dissipated like morning mist. If he saw the divine radiance that streamed out of the great master's pictures, and if he stood in the Vatican in front of the beautiful figures that masters thousands of years ago had formed out of blocks of marble, his breast swelled and he felt something so elevated, so holy, uplifting, great and good, and he wanted to create, to carve such figures out of a block of marble. He wanted to create an image of what rose up from his heart towards the Infinite, but how, and in what form? His fingers formed the soft clay into beautiful shapes, but the next day, as always, he smashed what he had created.

One day, when he was passing one of the fine palaces of which there are so many in *Rome*, he stopped at its large, open entrance gate, and saw cloisters adorned with statues that surrounded a small garden which was bursting with the loveliest roses. Large, white calla lilies with their green, lush leaves rose out of a marble basin where there was clear, plashing water; and past this glided a human figure, a young girl, the daughter of this princely house; so delicate, so light-footed, so beautiful! he had never seen any woman like her, though yes he had! painted by *Raphael*, painted as *Psyche*, in one of the palaces of *Rome*. Well, *there* she was painted, *here* she was *alive*.

She was alive in his thoughts and heart; and he walked back to his humble room and shaped a *Psyche* out of clay; it was the rich, young Roman, the high-born woman; and for the first time he looked on his work with a sense of satisfaction. It had significance, it was her. And when his friends saw it, they shouted with joy; this work was a revelation of his greatness as an artist, they had recognised it in advance, now it would be recognised by the world.

Clay has a certain flesh-like, live quality, but it does not possess the whiteness and permanence of marble; this *Psyche* had to come alive in a block of marble, and he had such a precious piece of marble; it had already lain for many years in the courtyard as his parents' possession; broken bottles, tops of fennel, remains of artichokes had been flung on top of it and sullied it, but inside it was like mountain snow; out of it the *Psyche* would rise.

It so happened one day – well, the bright star doesn't say anything about this, for it didn't see it, but we know it – a group of distinguished Romans entered the narrow, run-down street. The carriage stood some way off, the group had come to see the young artist's work, they had heard about it quite by chance. And who were these distinguished visitors? The poor young man! the all too happy young man he might also be called. The young girl herself stood there in his room, and what a smile she gave when her father said the words: 'But it is you, to the life!' that smile cannot be formed, that look cannot be reproduced, the wonderful look with which she gazed at the young artist, it was a look that lifted, ennobled and – crushed. 'The *Psyche* must be done in marble!' the rich lord said. And those were words of life for the dead clay and for the heavy block of marble, just as they were words of life for the enchanted young man. 'When the work is completed, I will buy it!' the princely lord said.

It was as if a new era began at the poor workshop; there was life and gaiety in there, hustle and bustle. The gleaming morning star saw how the work progressed. It was as if the clay itself had become animated ever since her visit, it in enhanced beauty it obeyed the well-known features.

'Now I know what life is!' he said exultantly, 'it is love! it is elevation into the magnificent, being transported into the beautiful! What my friends call life and pleasure is vanity, mere bubbles on the fermenting dregs, not the pure, heavenly altar wine, initiation into life!'

The block of marble was raised, the chisel cut away large chunks; measurements were carried out, points and marks placed, the craftsmanship aspect attended to, until little by little the stone turned into a body, a figure of beauty, the *Psyche*, as beautiful as God's image in the young woman. The heavy stone floated, danced, as light as air, a lovely *Psyche*, with the smile, divinely innocent, that had mirrored itself in the heart of the young sculptor.

The star in the rose-tinted morning saw this and assuredly understood what was taking place inside the young man, understood the changing hue of his cheeks, the glint in his eye as he created, reproduced what God had given.

'You are a master like those of Greek Antiquity!' his rapturous friends said. 'Soon the whole world will admire your *Psyche*!'

'*My Psyche!*' he repeated. 'Mine! yes, she must be mine! I too am an artist, like those great artists long ago! God has graciously given me this gift, elevated me, like that nobly-born woman!'

And he fell to his knees, wept in gratitude to God – and then forgot him for *her*, for her image in marble, the figure of *Psyche*, which stood as if carved out of snow, blushing in the morning sun.

He was going to see her in reality, the living, gliding figure, the one whose words sounded like music. He was going to inform those at the rich palace that the marble *Psyche* was now complete. He walked in, passed through the open courtyard where the water plashed from the dolphins in the marble basin, where the calla lilies bloomed and the fresh roses grew in profusion. He entered the large, high entrance hall, whose walls and ceiling were resplendent in colours with coats of arms and paintings. Smartly dressed servants, haughty, heads held high like sleigh horses with bells, went back and forth. Some of them had also audaciously sprawled out on carved wooden benches, as if they were the masters of the house. He informed them of his errand and was now led up the soft carpets of the shiny marble staircase. There were statues on both sides; he passed through rich apartments with statues and gleaming mosaic floors. The splendour and magnificence made his breathing heavy, but soon it became light again; the old princely lord received him so mildly, almost cordially, and when they had talked, he asked him when saying farewell to go over to the young signorina, she would also like to see him. Servants led him through magnificent rooms and halls to her chamber, where she herself was the magnificence and splendour.

She spoke to him; no Miserere, no church singing had been better able to melt his heart, lift his soul. He seized her hand, pressed it to his lips; no rose is as soft, but a fire went out from this rose, a fire passed through him, an elevation; words flew off his tongue, he did not realise it himself; does the crater know that it spouts out glowing lava? He declared his love for her. She stood there surprised, offended, proud, and with a disdain, yes, an expression as if she had suddenly touched a wet, clammy frog; her cheeks grew red, her lips pale; her eyes were on fire, and yet black as the dead of night.

'Lunatic!' she said. 'Away with you! Out of my sight!' and she turned her back on him. The expression on her beautiful face now seemed like that of a Medusa with its tangle of snakes. Like a sinking, lifeless object he went down to the street, like a sleepwalker he reached his home and woke up in great rage and pain, seized his hammer, lifted it high above his head and was about to shatter the beautiful marble statue; but in his state of mind he did not notice that his friend *Angelo* was standing close by him, now held his arm in a vice-like grip.

'Have you gone mad? What are you up to?'

They wrestled with each other; *Angelo* was the stronger, and with heaving breast the young artist flung himself down on a chair.

'What's happened!' *Angelo* asked. 'Pull yourself together! Speak!'

But what could he speak? What could he say? And since *Angelo* could not get him to speak, he let the matter lie.

'Your blood will thicken with all this eternal dreaming! be a normal human being like the rest of us, and don't live in an ideal world that will break your spirit! Get tipsy on some wine and

you'll sleep well as a result! Let a lovely girl be your doctor! The girl from the Campagna is a delight, like the princess in the marble castle, both are daughters of Eve and they can't be distinguished from one another in paradise! Just you follow your friend *Angelo*! I am your angel, your angel of life! There will come a time when you are old, your body will grow frail, and then one fine sunny day, where everything is smiles and rejoicing, you will lie there like a withered blade of grass that no longer grows! I don't believe what the priests say that there is a life beyond the grave! it is a beautiful illusion, a fairy tale for children, pleasant enough if you can imagine it, but I don't live in an imaginary world, I live in reality! Come now! Be a human being!

And he dragged him off with him, he was able to at this precise moment; there was a fire in the young artist's blood, a change in his soul, a sudden urge to free himself from all the old and familiar, everything he was used to, free himself from his own former self, and on that particular day he followed *Angelo*.

On the outskirts of *Rome* there lay an osteria frequented by artists, built into the ruin of an ancient Roman bath the large, yellow lemons hung midst the dark, glistening leaves and covered part of the old, reddish-yellow walls; the osteria was a deep vault, almost like a cave that stretched into the ruin; a lamp was burning there in front of the image of the Virgin Mary; a large fire had been lit in the fireplace, and here much roasting, boiling and braising was taking place; outside, under the lemon and laurel trees, there were a couple of laid-out tables. The two of them were cheerfully welcomed by their friends; they ate a little, drank a lot, which made them all quite gay; there was singing and the playing of guitars; a saltarello rang out, and the merry dance began. A couple of local girls, models for the young artists, joined in the dance, took part in all the merriment; two pretty female bacchantes! well, they didn't have the elegance of the *Psyche*, were not delicate, beautiful roses but fresh, hardy, flushed carnations.

How hot it was that day, still hot at sunset; fire in the blood, fire in the air, fire in every look. The air swam with gold and roses, life was gold and roses.

'Now you've joined us just for once! let the current around you and in you carry you off!'

'Never before have I felt so hale and hearty!' the young artist said. 'You are right, all of you are right, I have been a fool, a dreamer, human beings belong to reality and not to the imagination!'

To singing and the sound of guitars the young men set out in the clear, starry evening from the osteria through the narrow streets; the two flushed carnations, the daughters of Campagna were part of the procession.

In *Angelo's* room, among a profusion of sketches, scattered folios and glowing, exuberant pictures, their voices were more subdued, but no less ardent; on the floor lay many a drawing, so like the daughters of Campagna in alternating well-fleshed loveliness, and yet they themselves were far lovelier. The six-armed candelabrum had all its wicks burning and gleaming; and from within the human form burned and gleamed like a divinity.

'Apollo! Jupiter! I am lifted up into your heaven and magnificence! it is as if the flower of life were unfurling from my heart at this moment!'

Yes, it unfurled – broke, fell, and a stupefying, horrible stench whirled out and blinded his vision, numbed his thoughts, the firework display of the senses was extinguished, and everything went dark.

He reached home, sat down on his bed, collected himself. 'Shame on you!' came from his own mouth, from the depths of his heart. 'Miserable creature! Away! Out of my sight –!' And he heaved an oh so painful sigh.

'Away! 'Out of my sight!' these words of hers, the words of the living *Pysche* sounded in his breast, sounded from his lips. He lay his head down on the pillow, his thoughts grew blurred, and he fell asleep.

He woke with a start at dawn, collected his thoughts once more. What had happened? Had he dreamt all of it? dreamt *her* words, the visit to the osteria, the evening with the deep crimson carnations from Campagna? – No, all of it was reality, one he had not previously known.

The clear star shone in the purplish air, its rays fell on him and the marble *Psyche*, he himself shivered when contemplating this image of incorruption, his gaze was impure, he felt. He threw a cloth over it, touched it once more to reveal the figure, but he was unable to contemplate his own work.

Quiet, dark, coiled up in himself, he sat there the entire day, did not notice what was going on outside, no one knew what was going on inside, in this human heart.

Days and weeks passed; the nights dragged by slowest. One morning the twinkling star saw him, pale, racked with fever, get up from his bed, go over to the marble statue, lift aside the cloth, gaze with so pained a look, so intensely at his work and then, almost collapsing under the weight, haul the statue out into the garden. There was a dilapidated, dried-out well there, a hole one could call it, and into it he lowered the *Psyche*, threw earth over it, flung brushwood and nettles over the freshly dug soil.

'Away! Out of my sight!' was the brief funeral oration.

The star saw it from the rose-tinted air and it quivered in two heavy tears on the young man's deathly-pale cheeks –the one racked with fever, the death-racked one, as they called him on his sickbed.

Friar *Ignatius* came to him as friend and physician, came with the comforting words of religion, spoke of the peace and joy of the Church, of human sin, mercy and peace in God.

And the words fell like the warm rays of the sun on the wet, fermenting ground; it steamed and lifted the clouds of mist, the mental images, images that had their own reality; and from these floating islands he looked out over human life: nothing but errors and disappointments is what it was and had been to him. Art was a sorceress that carried us off into vanity, into earthly desires. We were false to ourselves, false towards our friends, false towards God. The serpent always spoke within us: 'taste and ye shall be as gods!'

Only now did he feel he had understood himself, found the road to truth and peace. In the Church was God's light and clarity, in the monk's cell the rest where the human tree could grow throughout eternity.

Friar *Ignatius* supported his way of thinking, and his decision stood firm. A child of this world became a servant of the Church, the young artist renounced the world and entered a monastery.

How lovingly, how gladly he was welcomed by the monks; how Sunday-like and festive his initiation was. God, he felt, was in the sunshine of the Church, radiating out from the holy images and from the gleaming crucifix. And when he now at the evening hour, at sunset, stood in his tiny cell and opened the window, looked out over the ancient city of *Rome*, the collapsed temples, the mighty but dead Colosseum, saw it in springtime when the acacias

were in bloom, the evergreens were fresh, the roses burst forth, the lemons and oranges glistened, the palm trees swayed, he felt himself moved and fulfilled like never before. The open quiet landscape of the Campagna stretched out towards the blue-tinged, snow-clad mountains, they seemed to be painted in the air; everything coalesced, breathed peace and beauty, so swimmingly, so dreamily – all of it a dream!

Yes, the world here was a dream, and the dream reigns for hours and can come again for hours, but life in a monastery is one of years, long years, many years.

From within comes much that makes a person impure, he had to acknowledge! What were the flames that at times swept through him? What spring of evil was it, unwished for, that constantly gushed forth? He chastised his body, but the evil came from within. What part of the spirit was it within him that twisted and turned about itself as lithely as the serpent and crept with his conscience in under the cape of loving-kindness and offered him comfort: the saints pray for us, the Virgin Mother prays for us, Jesus himself has given his blood for us. Was it the carefree mind of childhood or youth which caused him to surrender himself to grace and seemed to feel elevated by it, elevated above so many; since *he* after all had rejected the vanity of the world, he was a son of the Church.

One day, after many years, he met *Angelo*, who recognised him.

'Man!' he said, 'yes, it's you? Are you happy now? – You have sinned against God and rejected his gracious gift, wasted your calling in this world. Read the parable of the talents! the master who told it, he spoke the truth! What have you now gained and found! Aren't you concocting a dream-life for yourself! concocting a religion to suit *yourself*, as everyone probably does. What if everything was a dream, a fantasy, beautiful thoughts and nothing else!'

'Get thee behind me, Satan!' the monk said and left *Angelo*.

'There is a devil, a personal devil! I saw him today!' the monk mumbled. 'I once stretched out a finger to him, he seized my entire hand –! No!' he sighed, 'within me is evil, and in that human being there is evil, but he is not oppressed by it, he holds his head up high, has his sense of well-being; – and I seek to grasp my well-being in the consolation of religion –! if only it was consolation! if everything here, like the world I left behind, was merely beautiful thoughts! A delusion, like the loveliness of the reddish evening clouds are, like the quivering blueness of the distant mountains! Close to, they are different! Eternity, you are like the great, unending, dead-calm ocean that waves, calls, fills us with intimations, and if we climb out there, we sink, we disappear – die – cease to exist! – Delusion! Away! Out of my sight!'

And without tears, lost within himself, he knelt on his hard floor – for whom? The stone crucifix on the wall? No, his body adopted this position out of habit.

The deeper he gazed into himself, the darker it all seemed to him. 'Nothing within. Nothing without! A wasted life!' And this snowball of thought started to roll, to grow, to crush him – annihilate him.

'I dare not tell anyone about this gnawing worm inside me! my secret is my prisoner, if I let go of it, I belong to *it!*'

And the power of God in him wrestled and struggled.

'Lord! Lord!' he cried out in his despair, 'be merciful, grant me faith! – Your gracious gift I cast aside, my calling in this world! I lacked the strength, that You did not give me. Immortality,

the *Psyche* in my breast, – Away! Out of my sight! – it shall be buried like that *Psyche*, my best glimpse of life! – it will never rise from the grave!

The star in the rose-tinted air gleamed, the star that is sure to be extinguished and waft away while souls live and shine; its quivering rays fell on the white wall, but it left no writing there about glory in God, about mercy, about loving-kindness, that which resounds in the believer's breast.

'The *psyche* within shall never die! – Will it live on in consciousness? – can the unfathomable take place? – Yes! yes! my own *self* is unfathomable. You are unfathomable, oh Lord! Your entire world is unfathomable! – a miracle of Power, Glory – Love!'

His eyes gleamed, his eyes broke. The chiming of the church bell was the last sound over him, the deceased; and he was laid in the ground, fetched from *Jerusalem*, mixed with the dust of the pious dead.

After many years, his skeleton was exhumed, as that of the dead monks before him, it was dressed in the brown habit, a rosary was placed in his hand and he was stored in a niche of human bones like those found here at the burial of the monastery. And the sun shone outside, and the incense filled the air inside, the masses were read.

Years passed.

The bones all fell apart, amongst each other; the skulls were piled up, they formed the outer wall of an entire church; there too his stood in the blazing sunshine, the dead were so many, so many, nobody now knew their names, his neither. And look, in the sunshine something alive moved inside the two eye sockets, what was it? A speckled lizard leapt around inside the hollow skull, darted in and out of the empty, large eye sockets. It was now the life inside the head where once the great thoughts, bright dreams, the love of art and the magnificent had lifted itself, from which hot tears had flowed, and where hope for eternity had lived. The lizard leapt, vanished; the skull crumbled, became dust in the dust.

It was centuries later. The bright star shone unchanged, bright and large, as for thousands of years, the air had a reddish gleam, fresh as roses, flushing like blood.

Where there was once a narrow street with remains of an ancient temple there now lay a nunnery overlooking the square; here in the garden a grave was being dug, a young nun had died and this morning was to be laid to rest. The spade struck a stone; it gleamed dazzling white; it revealed itself as being white marble, rounded into a shoulder, more came to light; the spade was used with greater caution; a female head came into view, – butterfly wings. From the grave where the nun was to be laid, in the rose-tinted blush of morning, they lifted a lovely *Psyche*, carved out of white marble. 'How beautiful! flawless, a work of art from the very best period!' people said. Who could be the master? Nobody knew, nobody knew him except the star that had been gleaming for thousands of years; it knew the course of his life on earth, his trials, his weakness, his 'only a human being!' – but this being was dead, had wafted away like dust must and shall, but the result of his best effort, the most wonderful thing that revealed the divine within him, the *Psyche* that never dies, that outshines posthumous reputation, the gleam of it here on this earth, even this remained here was seen, recognised, admired and loved.

The bright morning star in the rose-coloured air shone with its twinkling light directly onto the *Psyche* and on the smile of bliss that played round the mouths and eyes of the admirers who saw the soul carved out of the block of marble.

Whatever is earthly wafts away, is forgotten, only the star in infinity knows that. Whatever is divine gleams on even in posterity, and still in existence when that too is extinguished will be the Psyche!