

toward A. Now I have gone back to the superhighway, but on the other side: I too am rushing toward A. All the cars I pass could be Y, or else all the cars that pass me. On the opposite lane all the cars advancing in the other direction could be Z, in his self-delusion. Or else Y too has stopped at a service station, has telephoned my house in A; not finding me in she has realized I am going to B, she has turned around. Now we are speeding in opposite directions, moving away from each other, and the car I pass or that passes me is Z, who also tried telephoning Y at the halfway point.

Everything is more uncertain than ever but I feel I've now reached a state of inner serenity: as long as we can check our telephone numbers and there is no answer then we will continue, all three of us, speeding back and forth along these white lines, with no points of departure or of arrival to threaten with their sensations and meanings the single-mindedness of our race, freed finally from the awkward thickness of our persons and voices and moods, reduced to luminous signals, the only appropriate way of being for those who wish to be identified with what they say, without the distorting buzz our presence or the presence of others transmits to our messages.

To be sure, the price paid is high but we must accept it: to be indistinguishable from all the other signals that pass along this road, each with his meaning that remains hidden and undecipherable because outside of here there is no one capable of receiving us now and understanding us.

The Count of Monte Cristo

I

From my cell, I can say little about the construction of this Château d'If where I have been imprisoned for so many years. The tiny barred window is at the end of a shaft that pierces the thickness of the wall: it frames no view; from the greater or lesser luminosity of the sky I can recognize approximately the hours and the seasons; but I do not know if, beneath that window, there is the open sea or the ramparts or one of the inner courtyards of the fortress. The shaft narrows in the form of a chute; to look out I would have to advance, crawling, to the very end; I have tried, it is impossible, even for a man reduced, as I am, to a mere shadow. The opening perhaps is farther than it seems: estimation of the distance is confused by the funnel-like perspective and by the contrast of the light.

The walls are so thick they could contain other cells, stairways, casemates, and powder magazines; or else the fortress could be all wall, a full and compact solid, with one live man buried in the middle. The images you summon up when you are imprisoned follow one another without any reciprocal exclusion: the cell, the aperture, the corridors along which the jailer comes twice a day with the soup and the bread could be simply tiny pores in a rock of spongy consistency.

You hear the sea pounding, especially on stormy nights; at times it seems almost that the waves are breaking here against the very wall to which I put my ear; at times they seem to be digging below, under the rocks of the foundations, and my cell seems to be at the top of the tallest tower, and the rumble rises through the prison, a prisoner too, as in the horn of a conch shell.

I prick up my ears: the sounds describe variable, jagged spaces and forms around me. From the jailers' shuffling I try to establish the network of the corridors, the turns, the openings, the straight lines broken by the dragging of the kettle to the threshold of each cell and by the creak of the locks: I succeed only in fixing a succession of points in time, without any correspondence in space. At night the sounds become more distinct, but more uncertain in marking places and distances: somewhere a rat is gnawing, an ill man groans, a boat's siren announces its entry into the Marseilles roads, and Abbé Faria's spade continues digging its way among these stones.

I don't know how many times Abbé Faria has attempted to escape: each time he has worked for months prising up the stone slabs, crumbling the seams of mortar, perforating the rock with rudimentary awls; but at the moment when the pick's last blow should open his way to the rocky shore, he realizes he has come out in a cell that is even deeper in the fortress than the one from which he set out. It requires only a little error of calculation, a slight deviation in the incline of a tunnel and he is penetrating into the prison's viscera with no hope of finding his way again. After every failure, he goes back to correcting the plans and formulas with which he has frescoed the walls of his cell; he goes back to improving his arsenal of improvised tools; and then he resumes his scraping.

2

I too have thought and still think about a method of escape; in fact, I have made so many surmises about the topography of the fortress, about the shortest and surest way to reach the outer bastion and dive into the sea, that I can no longer distinguish between my conjectures and the data based on experience. Working with hypotheses, I can at times construct for myself such a minute and convincing picture of the fortress that in my mind I can move through it completely at my ease; whereas the elements I derive from what I see and what I hear are confused, full of gaps, more and more contradictory.

In the early days of my imprisonment, when my desperate acts of rebellion hadn't yet brought me to rot in this solitary cell, the routine tasks of prison life had caused me to climb up and down stairs and bastions, cross the entrance halls and posterns of the Château d'If; but from all the images retained by my memory, which now I keep arranging and rearranging in my conjectures, there is not one that fits neatly with another, none that helps explain to me the shape of the fortress or the point where I now am. Too many thoughts tormented me then—about how I, Edmond Dantès, poor but honest sailor, could have run afoul of the law's severity and suddenly lost my freedom—too many thoughts to allow my attention to concern itself with the plan of my surroundings.

The bay of Marseilles and its islands have been familiar to me since boyhood; and every embarkation of my not long life as a sailor, the departures and the arrivals, had this background; but the seaman's eye, every time it encounters the black fort of If, shifts away in an instinctive fear. So when they brought me here chained in a boat filled with gendarmes, and this cliff and the walls then loomed on the horizon, I understood my fate and bowed my head. I didn't see—or I don't remember—the pier where the boat docked, the steps they made me climb, the door that closed behind my back.

Now that, with the passage of years, I have stopped brooding over the chain of infamy and ill-luck that caused my imprisonment, I have come to understand one thing: the only way to escape the prisoner's state is to know how the prison is built.

If I feel no desire to imitate Faria, it is because the very knowledge that someone is seeking an avenue of escape is enough to convince me that such an avenue exists or, at least, that one can set himself the problem of seeking it. So the sound of Faria's digging has become a necessary complement to the concentration of my thoughts. I feel not only that Faria is a man attempting his own escape but also that he is a part of my plan; and not because I am hoping for an avenue to safety opened by him—he has been wrong so many times by now I have lost all faith in his intuition—but because the only information I have concerning this place where I am has come to me from the series of his mistakes.

3

The walls and the vaults have been pierced in every direction by the Abbé's pick, but his itineraries continue to wind around themselves like a ball of yarn, and he constantly goes through my cell as he follows, each time, a different course. He has long since lost his sense of orientation: Faria no longer recognizes the cardinal points, indeed he cannot recognize even the zenith and the nadir. At times I hear scratching at the ceiling; a rain of plaster falls on me; a breach opens; Faria's head appears, upside down. Upside down for me, not for him; he crawls out of his tunnel, he walks head down, while nothing about his person is ruffled, not his white hair, nor his beard green with mold, nor the tatters of sackcloth that cover his emaciated loins. He walks across the ceiling and the walls like a fly, he sinks his pick into a certain spot, a hole opens; he disappears.

Sometimes he has hardly disappeared through one wall when he pops out again from the wall opposite: he hasn't yet drawn his heel through the hole here when his beard is already appearing over there. He emerges again, more weary, skeletal, aged, as if years had passed since the last time I saw him.

At other times, however, he has hardly slipped into his tunnel when I hear him make the sound of a long aspiration like somebody preparing to sneeze loudly: in the labyrinth of the fortress there is much cold and damp; but the sneeze never comes. I wait: I wait for a week, for a month, for a year; Faria doesn't come back; I persuade myself he is dead. All of a sudden the wall opposite trembles as if shaken by an earthquake; from the shower of stones Faria looks out, completing his sneeze.

We exchange fewer and fewer words; or we continue conversations I cannot remember ever having begun. I realize Faria has trouble distinguishing one cell from another among the many he crosses in his mistaken journeys. Each cell contains a pallet, a pitcher, a wooden slops bucket, a man standing and looking at the sky through a narrow slit. When Faria appears from underground, the prisoner turns around: he always has the same face, the same voice, the same thoughts. His name is the same: Edmond Dantès. The fortress has no favored points: it repeats in space and time always the same combination of figures.

4

In all my hypotheses of escape, I try to imagine Faria as the protagonist. Not that I tend to identify myself with him: Faria necessarily plays his role so that I can mentally envisage my escape in an objective light, as I could not do if I were living it: I mean, dreaming it in the first person. By now I no longer know if the man I hear digging like a mole is the real Faria opening breaches in the walls of the real fortress of Château d'If or whether it is the hypothesis of a Faria dealing with a hypothetical fortress. It amounts to the same thing in any case: it is the fortress that wins. It is as if, in the contests between Faria and the fortress, I pressed my impartiality so far as to side with the fortress against him . . . no, now I am exaggerating: the contest does not take place only in my mind, but between two real contenders, independently of me; my efforts are directed toward seeing it with detachment, in a performance without anguish.

If I can come to observe fortress and Abbé from a perfectly equidistant point of view, I will be able to discern not only the particular errors Faria makes time after time, but also the error in method which continually defeats him and which I, thanks to my correct setting of the problem, will be able to avoid.

Faria proceeds in this way: he becomes aware of a difficulty, he studies a solution, he tries out the solution, encounters a new difficulty, plans a new solution, and so on and on. For him, once all possible errors and unforeseen elements are eliminated, his escape can only be successful: it all lies in planning and carrying out the perfect escape.

I set out from the opposite premise: there exists a perfect fortress, from which one cannot escape; escape is possible only if in the planning or building of the fortress some error or oversight was made.

While Faria continues taking the fortress apart, sounding out its weak points, I continue putting it back together, conjecturing more and more insuperable barriers.

The images of the fortress that Faria and I create are becoming more and more different: Faria, beginning with a simple figure, is complicating it extremely to include in it each of the single unforeseen elements he encounters in his path; I, setting out from the jumble of these data, see in each isolated obstacle the clue to a system of obstacles, I develop each segment into a regular figure, I fit these figures together as the sides of a solid, polyhedron or hyperpolyhedron, I inscribe these polyhedrons in spheres or hyperspheres, and so the more I enclose the form of the fortress the more I simplify it, defining it in a numerical relation or in an algebraic formula.

But to conceive a fortress in this way I need the Abbé Faria constantly combating landslides of rubble, steel bolts, sewers, sentry boxes, leaps into nothingness, recesses in the sustaining walls, because the only way to reinforce the imagined fortress is to put the real one continuously to the test.

5

Therefore: each cell seems separated from the outside only by the thickness of a wall, but Faria as he excavates discovers that in between there is always another cell, and between this cell and the outside, still another. The image I derive is this: a fortress that grows around us, and the longer we remain shut up in it the more it removes us from the outside. The Abbé digs, digs, but the walls increase in thickness, the battlements and the buttresses are multiplied. Perhaps if he can succeed in advancing faster than the fortress expands, Faria at a certain point will find himself outside unawares. It would be necessary to invert the relative speeds so that the fortress, contracting, would expel the Abbé like a cannonball.

But if the fortress grows with the speed of time, to escape one would have to move even faster, retrace time. The moment in which I would find myself outside would be the same moment I entered here: I look out on the bay at last, and what do I see? A boat full of gendarmes is landing at If; in the midst is Edmond Dantès, in chains.

There, I have gone back to imagining myself as the protagonist of the escape, and I have immediately risked not only my future but my past, my memories. Everything that is unclear in the relationship between an innocent prisoner and his prison continues to cast shadows on images and decisions. If the prison is surrounded by *my* outside, that outside would bring me back inside each time I succeeded in reaching it: the outside is nothing but the past, it is useless to try to escape.

I must conceive of the prison either as a place that is only inside itself without an outside—that is, giving up the idea of leaving it—or I must conceive of it not as *my* prison but as a place with no relation to me inside or outside; that is, I must study an itinerary from inside to outside that precludes the import that "inside" and "outside" have acquired in my emotions; valid, that is, even if instead of "outside" I say "inside" and vice versa.

6

If outside there is the past, perhaps the future is concentrated at the innermost point of the island of If, in other words the avenue of escape is an avenue toward the inside. In the graffiti with which Abbé Faria covers his walls, two maps with ragged outlines alternate, constellated with arrows and marks: one is meant to be the plan of If, the other of an island of the Tuscan archipelago where a treasure is hidden: Monte Cristo.

It is, in fact, to seek this treasure that Abbé Faria wants to escape. To succeed in his intention he has to draw a line that in the map of the island of If carries him from inside to outside and in the map of the

island of Monte Cristo carries him from outside to that point which is farther inland than all the other points, the treasure cave. Between an island he cannot leave and an island he cannot enter there must be a relation: therefore in Faria's hieroglyphics the two maps can be superimposed and are almost identical.

It is hard for me to understand whether Faria is now digging in order to dive into the open sea or to penetrate the cave full of gold. In either case, if one looks closely, he is tending toward the same point of arrival: the place of the multiplicity of possible things. At times I visualize this multiplicity as concentrated in a gleaming underground cavern, at times I see it as an irradiating explosion. The treasure of Monte Cristo and the escape from If are two phases of the same process, perhaps successive perhaps periodical as in a pulsation.

The search for the center of If-Monte Cristo does not lead to results that are more sure than those of the march toward its unreachable circumference: in whatever point I find myself the hypersphere stretches out around me in every direction; the center is all around where I am; going deeper means descending into myself. You dig and dig and you do nothing but retrace the same path.

7

Once he has come into possession of the treasure, Faria intends to liberate the Emperor from Elba, give him the means to put himself again at the head of his army . . . The plan of escape-search on the island of If-Monte Cristo is therefore not complete if it does not include also the search-escape of Napoleon from the island where he is confined. Faria digs; he penetrates once again into the cell of Edmond Dantès; he sees the prisoner from behind, looking as usual at the sky through the slit-window; at the sound of the pick the prisoner turns: it is Napoleon Bonaparte. Faria and Dantès-Napoleon together excavate a tunnel in the fortress. The map of If-Monte Cristo-Elba is drawn in such a way that by turning it a certain number of degrees the map of Saint Helena is obtained: the escape is reversed into an exile beyond return.

The confused reasons for which both Faria and Edmond Dantès were imprisoned have, in different ways, something to do with the Bonapartist cause. That hypothetical geometric figure called If-Monte Cristo coincides in certain of its points with another figure called Elba-Saint Helena. There are points of the past and of the future in which Napoleonic history intervenes in our poor prisoners' history, and other points where Faria and I can or could influence a possible return of the Empire.

These intersections make any calculation of predictions even more complicated; there are points where the line that one of us is following bifurcates, ramifies, fans out; each branch can encounter branches that set out from other lines. Along one jagged line Faria goes by, digging; and only a few seconds keep him from bumping into the baggage wagons and cannon of the Imperial Army reconquering France.

We proceed in the dark; only the way our paths twist upon themselves warns us that something has changed in the paths of the others. We may say that Waterloo is the point where the path of Wellington's army might intersect the path of Napoleon; if the two lines meet, the segments beyond that point are cut off; in the map where Faria digs his tunnel, the projection of the Waterloo angle forces him to turn back.

8

The intersections of the various hypothetical lines define a series of planes arranged like the pages of a manuscript on a novelist's desk. Let us call Alexandre Dumas the writer who must deliver to his publisher as soon as possible a novel in twelve volumes entitled *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His work proceeds in this fashion: two assistants (Auguste Maquet and P. A. Fiorentino) develop one by one the

various alternatives that depart from each single point, and they furnish Dumas with the outline of all the possible variants of an enormous supernovel; Dumas selects, rejects, cuts, pastes, interposes; if a given solution is preferred for well-founded reasons but omits an episode he would find it useful to include, he tries to put together the stub-ends of disparate provenance, he joins them with makeshift links, racks his brain to establish an apparent continuity among divergent segments of future. The final result will be the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* to be handed to the printer.

The diagrams Faria and I draw on the walls of the prison resemble those Dumas pens on his papers to establish the order of the chosen variants. One bundle of sheets of paper can already be passed for printing: it contains the Marseilles of my youth; moving over the closely written lines I can fight my way onto the docks of the harbor, climb up the Rue de la Canebière in the morning sun, reach the Catalan village perched on the hill, see Mercedes again . . . Another bundle of papers is awaiting the final touches: Dumas is still revising the chapters of the imprisonment in the Château d'If; Faria and I are struggling inside there, ink-stained, in a tangle of revisions . . . At the edges of the desk there are piles of paper, the suggestions for the story's continuation which the two assistants are methodically compiling. In one of them, Dantès escapes from prison, finds Faria's treasure, transforms himself into the Count of Monte Cristo with his ashen, impassive face, devotes his implacable will and his boundless wealth to revenge; and the Machiavellian Villefort, the greedy Danglars, the grim Caderousse pay the price of their foul deeds; just as, for so many years among these walls, I had foreseen in my angry daydreams, in my longings for revenge.

Beside this, other sketches for the future are arranged on the desk. Faria opens a breach in the wall, bursts into the study of Alexandre Dumas, casts an impartial dispassionate look on the expanse of pasts and presents and futures—as I could not do, I who would try to recognize myself with tenderness in the young Dantès just promoted to his captaincy, with pity in the imprisoned Dantès, with delirious grandeur in the Count of Monte Cristo who makes his regal entrance into the proudest salons of Paris; I who in their place would find with dismay so many strangers—Faria takes a page here, a page there, like a monkey he moves his long hairy arms, hunts for the escape chapter, the page without which all the possible continuations of the novel outside the fortress become impossible. The concentric fortress, If-Monte Cristo-Dumas's desk, contains us prisoners, the treasure, and the supernovel *Monte Cristo* with its variants and combinations of variants in the nature of billions of billions but still in a finite number. Faria has set his heart on one page among the many, and he does not despair of finding it; I am interested in seeing the accumulation of rejected sheets increase, the solutions which need not be taken into account, which already form a series of piles, a wall . . .

Arranging one after the other all the continuations which allow the story to be extended, probable or improbable as they may be, you obtain the zigzag line of the *Monte Cristo* of Dumas; whereas connecting the circumstances that prevent the story from continuing you outline the spiral of a novel in negative, a *Monte Cristo* preceded by the minus sign. A spiral can wind upon itself toward the inside or toward the outside: if it twists toward the inside of itself, the story closes without any possible development; if it turns in widening curves it could, at every turn, include a segment of the *Monte Cristo* with the plus sign, finally coinciding with the novel Dumas will give to the printer, or perhaps even surpassing it in its wealth of lucky chances. The decisive difference between the two books—sufficient to cause one to be defined as true and the other as false, even if they are identical—lies entirely in the method. To plan a book—or an escape—the first thing to know is what to exclude.

9

And so we go on dealing with the fortress, Faria sounding out the weak points of the wall and coming up against new obstacles, I reflecting on his unsuccessful attempts in order to conjecture new outlines of walls to add to the plan of my fortress-conjecture.

If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is impossible to escape, this conceived fortress either will be the same as the real one—and in this case it is certain we shall never escape from here, but at least we will achieve the serenity of one who knows he is here because he could be nowhere else—or it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible than from here—and this, then, is a sign that here an opportunity of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it.