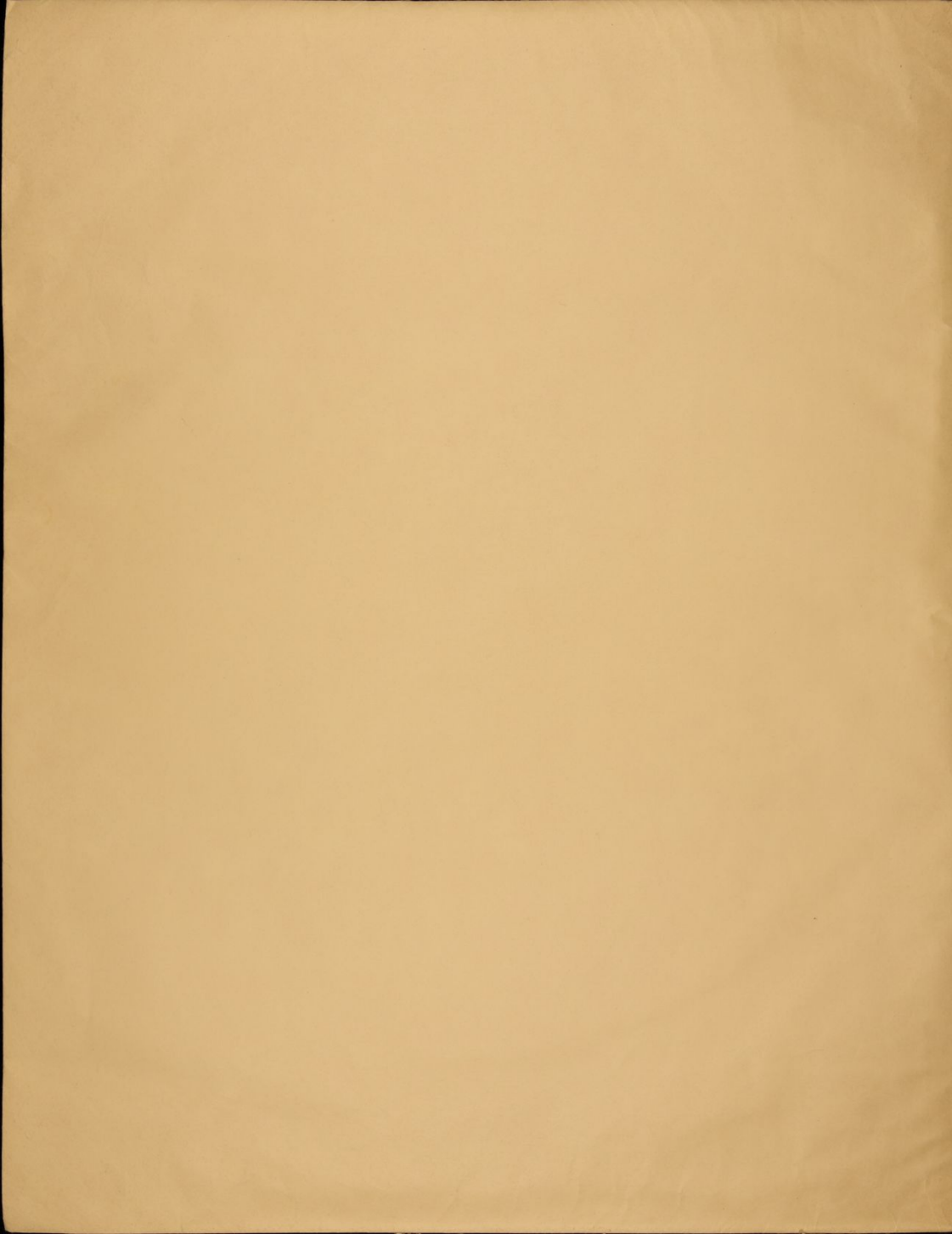


ALBERTO SAMI
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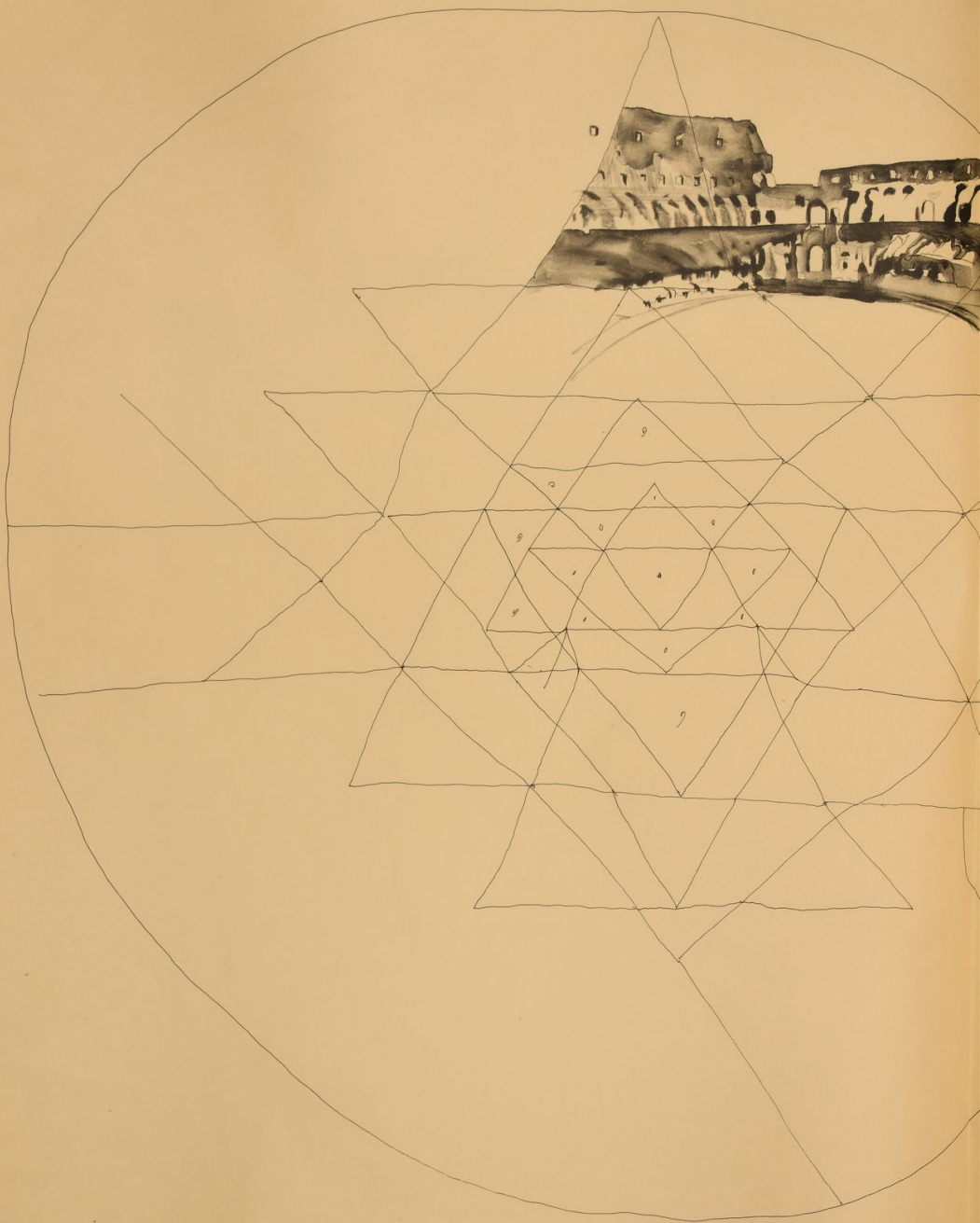
Alberto Savinio

THE
DEPARTURE
OF
THE
ARGONAUT

Francesco Clemente

Petersburg Press

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Chapter I

Under the station roof, in the heavy, painful shadows of heat peculiar to the hour immediately following midday, I catch sight of the light brown eyes of my brother. I watch him zigzag through a crowd that views my departure with indifference. But for us and the burning circle of our affections, it takes on the solemnity of an act of fate.

A jolt rattles my delicate stomach; an obvious sign that the train has begun to move.

On the hemp-yellow horizon nothing remains but spires: the herculean campanile and the square towers of Ferrara.

Despite all efforts to acquaint myself with the more sceptical philosophies – beyond what is natural to me – I still can't master that prickly, indefinable sensation which takes hold of a traveler at the beginning of every journey. Every hint of pragmatism vanishes from my soul and I feel as if I'm suddenly tumbling back through the sepulchral centuries until I find myself in the situation of the troglodyte, pitted against some terrifying phenomenon, some vague doom. Deep in my instincts, insufficiently cauterized by the theory of positivism, primitive fear – that incubator of superstitions – is born again inside me. I anxiously search the brown horizon of the city for the frivolous little balls of the astronomer Bongiovanni. I catch sight of them far off, cheerfully turning in the powerful glint of the sun, and with their aid I cast lucky horoscopes and happy auguries for the uncertain outcome of my ultramarine voyage.

Encouraged, I swiftly travel back up the order of the centuries descended but a moment ago and situate myself once again under the sun of our own epoch of splendor and conquest. My good humor returns and, seeing that I've passed the danger zone, I dangle from the train window to stick my tongue at Worbas, the enigma no longer to be feared. But in so doing I notice Ferrara has ceased to exist, and so I salute her: Goodbye, city of geometrical debauch!

I lack the requisite self-esteem to travel by express train: in one of those arrogant luxury convoys that split your ears when they rumble by, equipped with sleeping and dining cars and towed by two enormously bloated locomotives, set high atop paired wheels and crowned with stumpy smokestacks – horrible in the false impression it creates of being an ironclad battle station.

The train carrying me and my destinies is a modest, homely train. It's a long tapeworm of old black cars with little third class coaches at the rear and a fine old-fashioned steam engine in front which retains in its anatomy a certain familiarity with the early machines of George Stephenson: lean in the belly, slender in pistons, but with a fierceness to its smokestack, tightly pinched at the throat and full and dignified at lips covered with a sort of inverted sieve which bestows on it an imperial haughtiness.

My train has no fixed goal, has a capricious way of moving and takes on all the mathematical nomenclature of the railway timetables from its "16."

I'm amazed that it persists in remaining within the idiotic rigidity of the tracks, and await some stimulus for it to toss itself into the countryside, springing over hedges and the pointed tops of farmhouses, escaping through the fields to the hysterical flight of chickens and the furious howling of enraged dogs.

Nevertheless, I feel wonderfully calm, stirred by none of the sensations of speed and impatience which generally titillate the paying, voluntary traveler. I travel cost-free and at the command of the state, which instills in me a sweet serenity that is reinforced every time I touch the parchment warrant in the left-hand pocket of my jacket; a military document on which some man, undoubtedly powerful though unknown to me, has traced out my destiny with indelible characters.

My powers lie dormant since suspended above me I sense the

threat of a far greater power generated by and, as it were, associated with the triple phantom: Government, Army and Nation. This is the power that has set me in motion and directs me with a slow yet irresistible pressure, forcing me to bury my willpower and cherish the illusion that I'm amongst the Blessed in my apathy; it compresses my actual nature into the form of an infinitesimal molecule in the immense body of an army composed of flesh and bone and nurtured on the blood of all the sturdy manhood this great country has to offer.

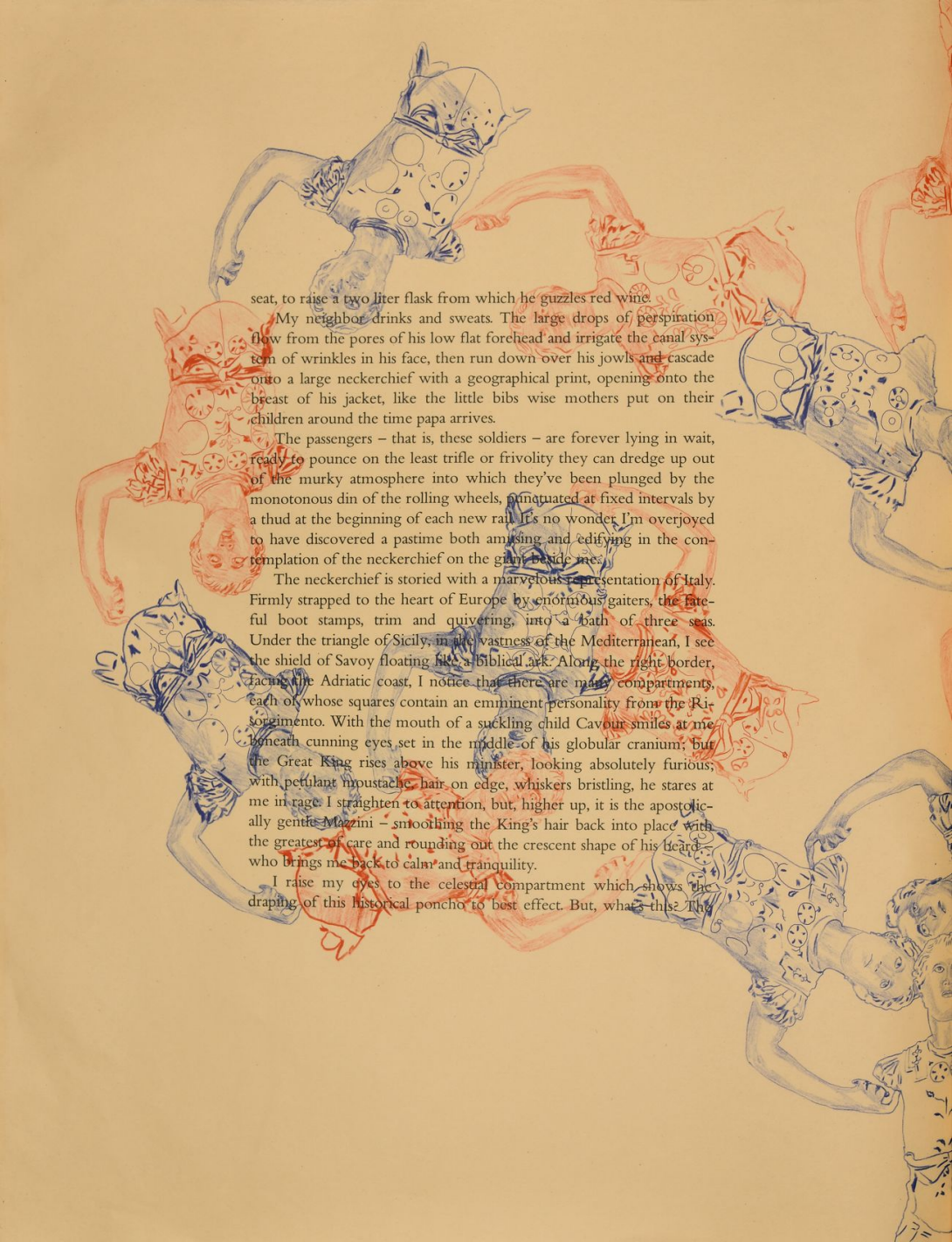
I take a seat in the last coach which is very comfortable and copiously ventilated by such a long line of large windows that I experience the sensation of careening through the landscape on an electrified bench.

What's more, my coach is embellished at stem and stern with two charming balconies that are no longer built into the modern conveyance. Progress in the art of locomotion and commercial exigencies have degenerated that aimlessness which typified the Stendhalian voyage into a mere anxiety-ridden dash to one's goal.

My coach isn't crammed with malodorous humanity, as one might expect of a coach requisitioned for troop transport: we are but a few – a dozen – add to them a pair of identical guards with hands folded over the mouths of their carbines, standing rosy-checked and mindlessly bolt-upright at the front of the car, and a sailor who from force of habit perches on the railing of the rear balcony with the nautical elegance of someone about to hoist sail over the moorhead on the foremast.

A burly soldier lies on the bench opposite me with his head hanging upside down and his mouth wide open, looking like a seduced Holofernes. He has such a tragic look about him, such a stormy cast to his face, that I gather he's the victim of terrifying nightmares.

But I notice that his sleep hasn't taken him too far beyond reality, since like clockwork he's still capable of sticking his left hand under his



seat, to raise a two liter flask from which he guzzles red wine.

My neighbor drinks and sweats. The large drops of perspiration flow from the pores of his low flat forehead and irrigate the canal system of wrinkles in his face, then run down over his jowls and cascade onto a large neckerchief with a geographical print, opening onto the breast of his jacket, like the little bibs wise mothers put on their children around the time papa arrives.

The passengers – that is, these soldiers – are forever lying in wait, ready to pounce on the least trifle or frivolity they can dredge up out of the murky atmosphere into which they've been plunged by the monotonous din of the rolling wheels, punctuated at fixed intervals by a thud at the beginning of each new rail. It's no wonder I'm overjoyed to have discovered a pastime both amusing and edifying in the contemplation of the neckerchief on the gaily bearded men.

The neckerchief is storied with a marvelous presentation of Italy. Firmly strapped to the heart of Europe by enormous gaiters, the fateful boot stamps, trim and quivering, into a bath of three seas. Under the triangle of Sicily, in the vastness of the Mediterranean, I see the shield of Savoy floating like a Biblical ark. Along the right border, facing the Adriatic coast, I notice that there are many compartments, each of whose squares contain an eminent personality from the Risorgimento. With the mouth of a suckling child Cavour smiles at me beneath cunning eyes, set in the middle of his globular cranium; but the Great King rises above his minister, looking absolutely furious; with pertulant moustache hair on edge, whiskers bristling, he stares at me in rage. I straighten to attention, but, higher up, it is the apostolically gentle Mazzini – smoothing the King's hair back into place with the greatest of care and rounding out the crescent shape of his beard, who brings me back to calm and tranquility.

I raise my eyes to the celestial compartment which shows the draping of this historical poncho to best effect. But, what's this? The

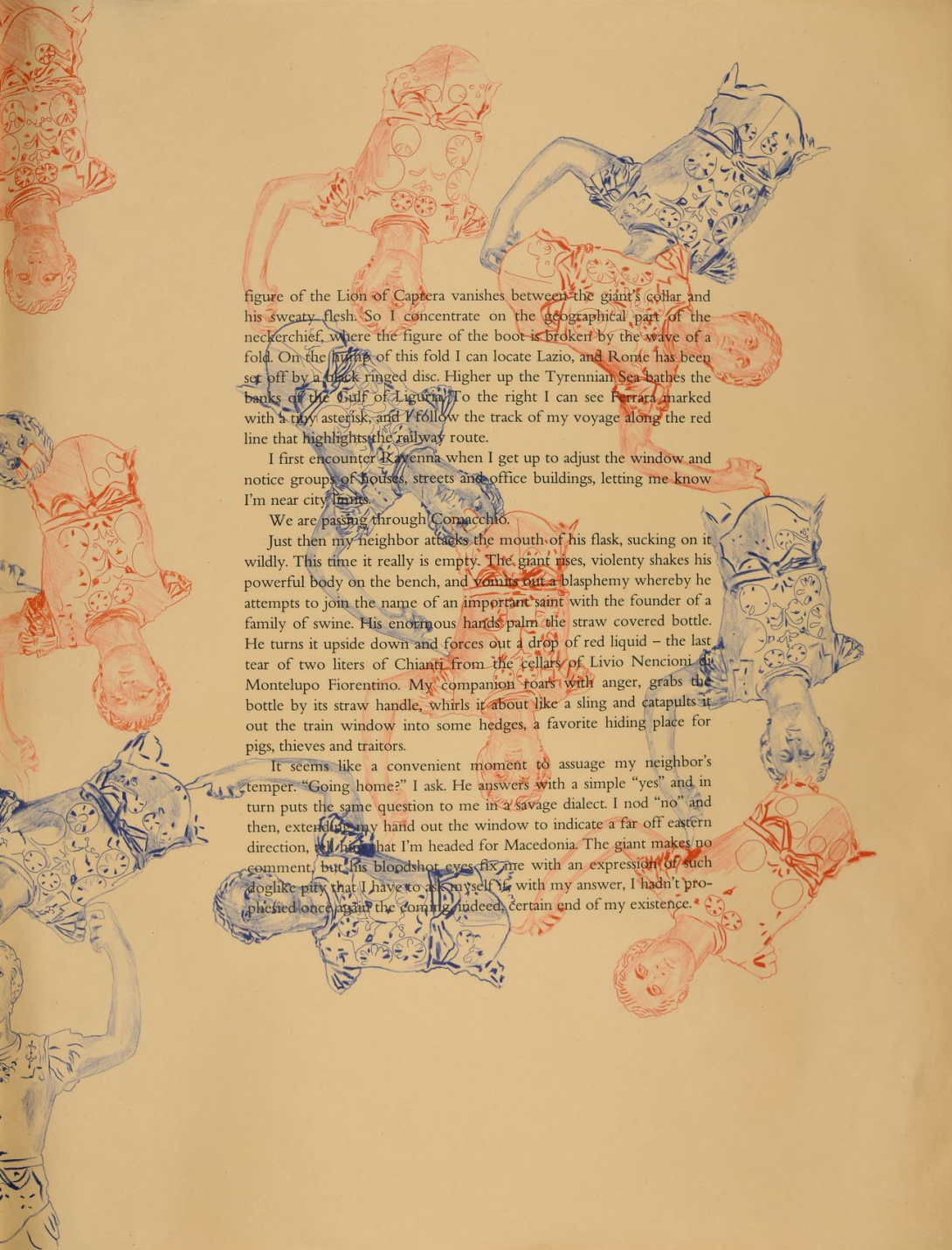


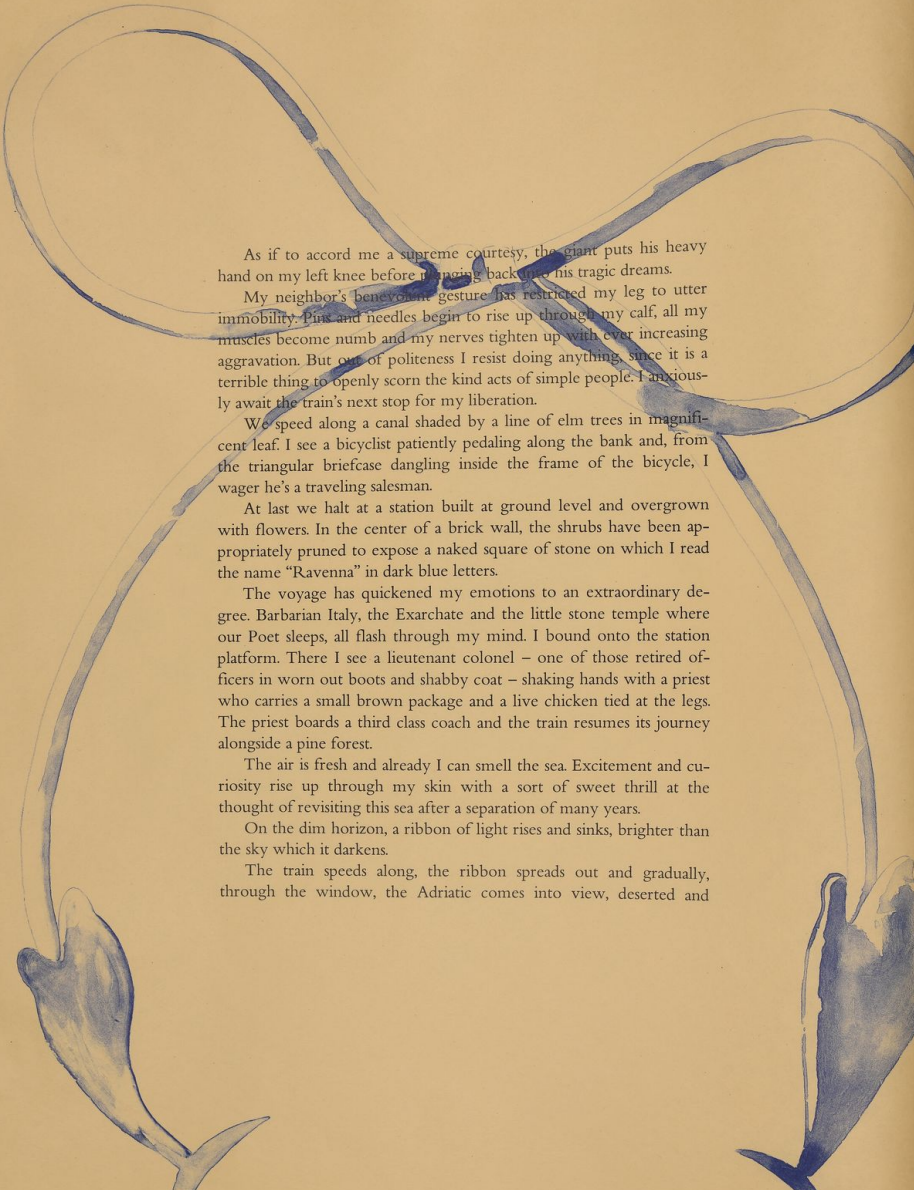
figure of the Lion of Capraia vanishes between the giant's collar and his sweaty flesh. So I concentrate on the geographical part of the neckerchief, where the figure of the boot is broken by the wave of a fold. On the margin of this fold I can locate Lazio, and Rome has been set off by a black ringed disc. Higher up the Tyrrhenian Sea bathes the banks of the Gulf of Liguria. To the right I can see Ferrara marked with a tiny asterisk, and I follow the track of my voyage along the red line that highlights the railway route.

I first encounter Ravenna when I get up to adjust the window and notice groups of houses, streets and office buildings, letting me know I'm near city limits.

We are passing through Comacchio.

Just then my neighbor attacks the mouth of his flask, sucking on it wildly. This time it really is empty. The giant rises, violently shakes his powerful body on the bench, and vomits out a blasphemy whereby he attempts to join the name of an important saint with the founder of a family of swine. His enormous hands palm the straw covered bottle. He turns it upside down and forces out a drop of red liquid – the last tear of two liters of Chianti from the cellars of Livio Nencioni di Montelupo Fiorentino. My companion roars with anger, grabs the bottle by its straw handle, whirls it about like a sling and catapults it out the train window into some hedges, a favorite hiding place for pigs, thieves and traitors.

It seems like a convenient moment to assuage my neighbor's temper. "Going home?" I ask. He answers with a simple "yes" and in turn puts the same question to me in a savage dialect. I nod "no" and then, extending my hand out the window to indicate a far off eastern direction, tell him that I'm headed for Macedonia. The giant makes no comment, but his bloodshot eyes fix me with an expression of such doglike pity that I have to assuage myself, with my answer, I hadn't prophesied once again the coming, indeed, certain end of my existence.



As if to accord me a supreme courtesy, the giant puts his heavy hand on my left knee before plunging back into his tragic dreams.

My neighbor's benevolent gesture has restricted my leg to utter immobility. Pins and needles begin to rise up through my calf, all my muscles become numb and my nerves tighten up with ever increasing aggravation. But out of politeness I resist doing anything, since it is a terrible thing to openly scorn the kind acts of simple people. I anxiously await the train's next stop for my liberation.

We speed along a canal shaded by a line of elm trees in magnificent leaf. I see a bicyclist patiently pedaling along the bank and, from the triangular briefcase dangling inside the frame of the bicycle, I wager he's a traveling salesman.

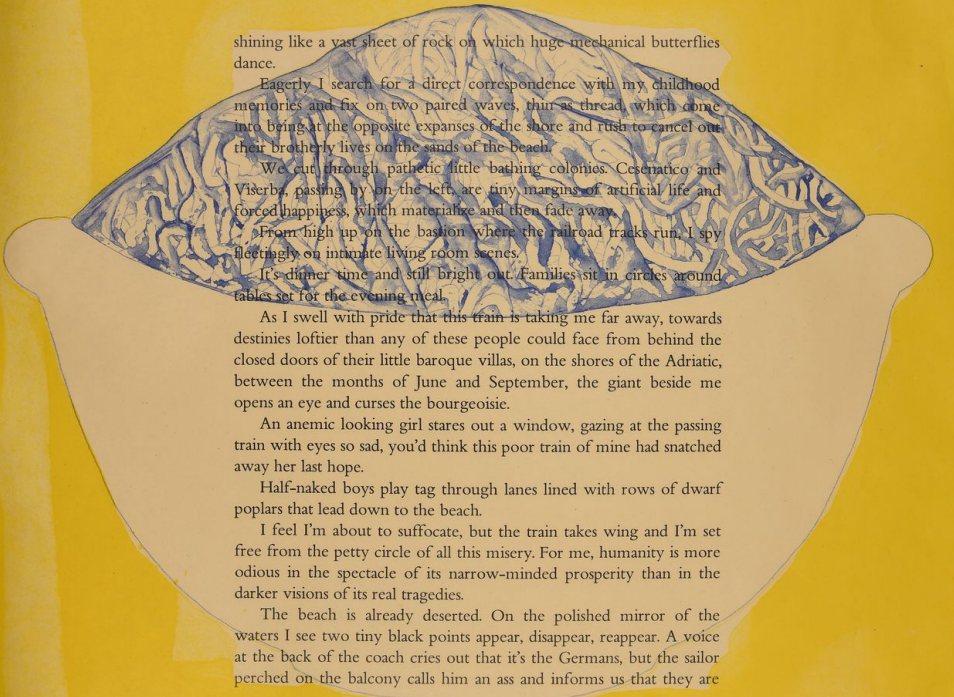
At last we halt at a station built at ground level and overgrown with flowers. In the center of a brick wall, the shrubs have been appropriately pruned to expose a naked square of stone on which I read the name "Ravenna" in dark blue letters.

The voyage has quickened my emotions to an extraordinary degree. Barbarian Italy, the Exarchate and the little stone temple where our Poet sleeps, all flash through my mind. I bound onto the station platform. There I see a lieutenant colonel - one of those retired officers in worn out boots and shabby coat - shaking hands with a priest who carries a small brown package and a live chicken tied at the legs. The priest boards a third class coach and the train resumes its journey alongside a pine forest.

The air is fresh and already I can smell the sea. Excitement and curiosity rise up through my skin with a sort of sweet thrill at the thought of revisiting this sea after a separation of many years.

On the dim horizon, a ribbon of light rises and sinks, brighter than the sky which it darkens.

The train speeds along, the ribbon spreads out and gradually, through the window, the Adriatic comes into view, deserted and



shining like a vast sheet of rock on which huge mechanical butterflies dance.

Eagerly I search for a direct correspondence with my childhood memories and fix on two paired waves, thin as thread, which come into being at the opposite expanses of the shore and rush to cancel one their brotherly lives on the sands of the beach.

We cut through pathetic little bathing colonies. Cesenatico and Viserby, passing by on the left, are tiny margins of artificial life and forced happiness, which materialize and then fade away.

From high up on the bastion where the railroad tracks run, I spy fleetingly on intimate living room scenes.

It's dinner time and still bright out. Families sit in circles around tables set for the evening meal.

As I swell with pride that this train is taking me far away, towards destinies loftier than any of these people could face from behind the closed doors of their little baroque villas, on the shores of the Adriatic, between the months of June and September, the giant beside me opens an eye and curses the bourgeoisie.

An anemic looking girl stares out a window, gazing at the passing train with eyes so sad, you'd think this poor train of mine had snatched away her last hope.

Half-naked boys play tag through lanes lined with rows of dwarf poplars that lead down to the beach.

I feel I'm about to suffocate, but the train takes wing and I'm set free from the petty circle of all this misery. For me, humanity is more odious in the spectacle of its narrow-minded prosperity than in the darker visions of its real tragedies.

The beach is already deserted. On the polished mirror of the waters I see two tiny black points appear, disappear, reappear. A voice at the back of the coach cries out that it's the Germans, but the sailor perched on the balcony calls him an ass and informs us that they are

our own submarines defending our coast. The argument comes to nothing since it stems from rivalry between two branches of the Armed Forces.

Evening draws near. The open plain to my right is completely black. And look! A giant trapezoid composed of lights suddenly appears. We are passing by the airfield at Rimini where a seaplane takes off and performs pirouettes above our train.

My heroic companions remain unmoved. Some among them lean out the windows to watch, but without a trace of any real curiosity.

These few stare at the seaplane and the airfield, but they stare at it all with bull's eyes, that is, with the eyes of an animal appreciated while alive by myself and all philosophical men, and appreciated, when dead, by the entire community of anti-vegetarians as well.

With an exquisite naturalness these men show that they have already seen enough, that nothing more can surprise or astonish them. I must confess that I like the unconscious scepticism of my simple heroic companions. I really do!

When we arrive at Rimini it's quite dark. The men file out of the train and shut themselves up again in a dark station warehouse, under the armed supervision of the sentinels.

Roll call is interminable. I answer 'present', which sounds like a curse, to a stupid voice that's bungled my name, and then proceed to the back of the warehouse where there's a dim light and a quasi executioner in a T-shirt, selling stale cold cuts and moldy loaves of bread at the outrageous prices of a Lucas or a Larue.

I dine on the bread and two rounds of stinking pigs feet, sipping a tepid Fontanella.

I'm getting tired, so when everyone gets back on the train now bound for Ancona, I search for an isolated spot to sleep and choose one outside the toilet.