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Forty-nine Digressions

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Neunundvierzig Ausschweifungen

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Short Account of a Long Journey

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to encourage you in cordial terms to devote yourselves to the following short account of my travels with the requisite composure. You will know from my publications that I rose in the year 'ninety-seven. I got up and went away with a small case. The purpose of my journey now escapes me. Nor do I remember whether I went south or north. I do not recollect the situation that I left behind me either. I believe that everything was changing behind me, there was steam, I got up, I went away, I travelled through the natural world for some time, I stood up, I sat down again and I travelled on, and everything began changing behind me, I feel sure of that, everything fell out or fell in or fell over, or else it all grew together. One day I came to the Congo, and as for my arrival there, when occasion offers I will make some remarks about it, about my departure and my arrival.

First, however, I would like to tell you about a time when the only water to be found was in the footprints of elephants, from which I drank in a quivering heat haze in the middle of Africa. Bodies of animals lay stacked above one another in the dry hollows, bloated, twitching, breathing stertorously. The way they lay on top of each other attracted my attention to such an extent that I instantly decided to write a detailed account of the phenomenon. But just as I was about to begin a man appeared in the background of this scene, there in that deserted region, and immediately afterwards he disappeared into the thickets. He appeared and disappeared, and it was all so surprising that I wanted nothing but to record that incident, his appearance and disappearance in the middle of Africa, just that small movement. I observed everything else without the slightest interest.

Some time later, in the east of Guatemala, there was talk now and then of tall, thin, ground-dwelling animals which suddenly vanished down deep holes and were never seen again. I made this discovery near Mazatenango. I will describe these animals at length when occasion offers, I said to myself, and for a while I thought of nothing but

their thin, very moist, long and wormlike bodies disappearing into the ground, but finally I lost interest in that idea too, in fact I did so at the very moment when a man silently offered me a black cigar. I was in the vicinity of Mazatenango, such was the sequence of events, I was in a bar by the seaside when a man appeared and sat down beside me without a word. I thought it appropriate to reflect on the matter, not then, not at that very minute, but after a suitable interval. However, in the middle of that interval another man appeared. He appeared wearing a perfectly ordinary hat and making a perfectly ordinary gesture. Indeed that gesture, that movement of his hand, was so ordinary that it could not have surprised any of us, ladies and gentlemen. Consequently I will not describe his gesture, or at least not here and now.

Shortly afterwards I continued my journey without a word. In the vicinity of Nagasaki, in another bar by the seaside, I noticed a man hauling in a greatly swollen fish from the depths. Perhaps I should describe how he cut the fish in two, nodding his head. A large frozen moon presided over this procedure, a large frozen moon which I will describe later. I noticed the crooked, ponderous flight of the night-birds, the clouds of mosquitoes, the mosquito-clouds. I was not entirely indifferent to all of this, but I was indifferent enough at that moment to pay it no further attention. Something similar happened in Rangoon. And also in New Orleans. In Calcutta the water rose in my head, and it did the same in Lagos, in Shanghai, in Yokohama, wherever I sat down and thought about life the water rose in my head.

An incident that I cannot forget, and that I will note down some time or other, was the sunset in Valparaiso. The sun went down with such force in Valparaiso that I rushed out of the bar and disappeared into the distance. I formed the intention of describing it at length some time or other. At the time, however, I merely felt the need to rush headlong out of that bar and into the interior of the country, to continue my reflections in another bar, in Santiago or in Talca or perhaps in San Felipe. I held my peace, and so did the man sitting opposite me at the table. He flowed over the food placed before him, he flowed over the pale, greasy chicken and soaked it up. Finally he rose, paid, and went away. I had to go after him and embark on a life of adventure in order to search for him and finally, two or three years later, to find him. When I sat opposite

him in a hotel restaurant in May of the year 'ninety-nine, in Hong Kong or some other part of the world, I thought, as the heavy seas rolled outside, this was so monumental, so unique a moment that nothing could ever outdo it. I saw this man eating. I saw this man in Hong Kong or some other part of the world leaning over the table with all his might, devouring everything placed before him. And in May 'ninety-nine I saw him suddenly throw his plate at the hotel wall, I saw noodles hanging down like bloodstains, and small, sticky puddles on the floor, and flabby, cartilaginous meat, and the rats emerged at enormous speed from all sides in that hotel and fell upon the remains of the food with a shrill squealing, a rat-like scraping and scratching, while I spooned up my dessert I heard the biting of little bones, the cracking, crunching and munching of something or other, I heard their hissing, their little rat-like hissing, and while I spooned up my dessert and watched this scene, of which I shall give a detailed account in the near future, the rats fell on one another and ate each other up until there was nothing left of them to be seen, and this was in May 'ninety-nine. Later I also ate a small sweet cake lying on my plate as prettily as a small sweet cake, it was pretty as a small sweet cake and it tasted like a small sweet cake, in the mirror opposite I saw myself putting a piece of this small sweet cake in my mouth, but it no longer had any significance, once I had observed my mouth closing over a small piece of cake in the mirror it was entirely without significance. The sight interested me so little that I was convinced I would never feel called upon to write a precise account of it.

When it was quiet, when the musicians had gone, when the waiters had swept up the remains of the evening with their brooms, when a little plaster had fallen from the hotel ceiling I went out over the sticky floor, through the swing-door, down the lifeless street and up to the town. Later I sat by Bilbao beach, and the water rose higher and higher in my head.

I had been sitting there for a long time when someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder. It was Nagelschmitz. I was greatly surprised to see Nagelschmitz in Bilbao, or where was I sitting now? In Tampico or Montevideo. I rose and was going to give him a friendly greeting, but then I sat down again. What are you thinking of? asked

Nagelschmitz. At the time I sat quite still, it was May of the year 'ninety-nine. I don't know what I'm thinking of, I thought.

Later, if not very much later, I spent several weeks searching the Upper Amazon area for him until I found him. Nagelschmitz said something, but I failed to understand him and soon lost sight of him. However, I can assure you that I immediately began wondering what words I could use to describe this encounter, I really did intend to note down a precise record of our meeting, but my attention was so distracted by another incident that I decided to go on my way again without a word. And as I was going on my way I met a man who tried to strike up a conversation with me. He was talking about grits sliding and scratching as they made their way soundlessly through the gut. I didn't understand him, and I went on. A little later I passed a man talking about birds swallowed unplucked, sacks full of fattened snails, and many other things, but I couldn't understand him. Next moment I reached a region of attractive vegetation where rivers flowed with an agreeable rushing sound, and I sat down in a restaurant. A waiter appeared and brought me a calf's-head cake nicely cut up into slices, a pleasant little meal, still warm and very solid, and painted with beaten egg.

All this was surprising enough, but I had an even more astonishing experience in the first-class compartment of the express train to Mainz. I stood up and sat down again, and everything began to change behind me. I travelled through the natural world for a while, and when I was back in my apartment I began looking for a pencil so that I could write it all down, ladies and gentlemen, everything that I have just imparted to you in this lecture.

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