

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Europa

Tim Parks

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About the Author

Tim Parks's previous novels include *Tongues of Flame* (winner of the Somerset Maugham and Betty Trask Awards), *Loving Roger* (winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), *Cara Massimina* and *Mimi's Ghost*. His non-fiction work includes the bestselling *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education* and *Adultery and Other Diversions*. *Europa* is his ninth novel. His most recent novel is *Destiny*. Tim Parks lives in Italy.

ALSO BY TIM PARKS

Fiction

Tongues of Flame

Loving Roger

Home Thoughts

Family Planning

Goodness

Cara Massimina

Shear

Mimi's Ghost

Destiny

Non-Fiction

Italian Neighbours

An Italian Education

Adultery and Other Diversions

Europa

Tim Parks



*Europa (in Athens) does business
at truly reasonable rates.
You needn't fear interruption
or the gainsaying of whims;
also, she offers irreproachable
sheets, and – in winter –
a coal-fire. This time, Zeus,
come as you are. No bull.*

Antipater of Thessalonika

*Love's night & a lamp
judged our vows:
that she would love me ever
& I should never leave her.
Love's night & you, lamp,
witnessed the pact.
Today the vow runs:
'Oaths such as these, waterwords.'
Tonight, lamp,
witness her lying*

– in other arms.

Meleager

Part One

'My dear girl, where there are women there are sure to be slaps. It was Napoleon who said that, I think.'

Zola, Nana

CHAPTER ONE

I AM SITTING slightly off-centre on the long back seat of a modern coach crossing Europe. And this in itself is extraordinary. For I hate coaches, I have always hated coaches, and above all I hate modern coaches, not just because of the strong and nauseating smell of plastics and synthetic upholstery, but because of the way the supposed desires of the majority are now foisted upon everybody – I mean myself – in the form of videoscreens projecting from beneath the luggage rack every six seats or so, and of course piped music oozing from concealed loudspeakers. So that even as we pull out of Piazza dell'Università into the morning traffic on Corso Vercelli in this strange city I have lived in for so long of stone and trams and noble façades and Moroccans selling boxes of contraband cigarettes laid out on the pavements under propped-up umbrellas – because it's raining, as it will in Milan in May – even now, before the long trip has hardly started, we are having to listen to a smug male voice singing with fake and complacent hoarseness about *un amore passionale*, which he cannot, he claims, forget, and which has *destroyed his life forever*, a theme, I suspect, that may be the very last thing one needs to be subjected to at only shortly after eight on a Monday morning, and not long after one's forty-fifth birthday. Though many of the younger travellers are singing along (the way fresh recruits, I believe, will sing along on their way to war).

Yes, that it was a mistake, I reflect, sitting slightly right of centre on the long back seat of this modern coach setting out across Europe, that it was a big mistake to have come on this trip, I have never doubted from the moment I agreed

to it, and perhaps even before, if such a thing is possible. Or let's say that the very instant I took this decision was also the instant I recognized, and recognized that I had always recognized, that coming on this trip was one of those mistakes I was made to make. You were made to make this mistake, I thought. By which I don't mean of course to put it on a par with the grander and more spectacular mistakes that have given shape and structure to what one can only refer to as one's life, just that, upon having agreed, in answer to a request from a colleague, to sign my name at the bottom of a list of other signatures of other colleagues, I immediately appreciated that this was precisely the kind of squalid, absurd and wilful mistake that somebody like myself would make. This is the kind of thing you do, I told myself. You agree to travel for twelve hours on a coach in one direction and then, two days later, for twelve hours on the same coach (a modern coach to boot, with piped music and videos and synthetic smell) in the return direction, in order to lend your name, for the very little it is worth, to a cause which not only do you not support, but which from a purely intellectual point of view, if such a miracle exists, you oppose, you oppose it, and this, what's more, through an appeal to an institution which again not only do you not support, nor subscribe to in any way, but which you frequently feel perhaps should not exist at all. This is the kind of person you are. And trying to find a comfortable position for my head on a brushed nylon headrest at the back of this big coach presently jammed at a crossing despite the green light, I reflect once again that when, and this would have been early April, Vikram Griffiths said to me, clearing his throat and rubbing his fingers across a polished Indian baldness, as he will, or in his sideburns, or in the down of hair behind his thick neck, and then adjusting his spectacles, as he is doing at this very moment some way up the central corridor of this hideous modern coach, leaning stockily, dog nipping his ankles, over the shoulders and

doubtless breasts of a young girl, gestures one presumes he makes out of nervousness and a desire to give people the impression that what he is saying is important and exciting – a dramatized nervousness is perhaps what I mean, a nervousness become conscious of itself and then tool of itself in a never-ending and self-consuming but always coercive narcissism – when Vikram Griffiths said to me, swallowing catarrh, though without his dog that day, Jerry, boyo – because Vikram is not just an Indian but a Welsh Indian, the only Indian ever to speak Welsh, he claims – Jerry, boyo, we are going to appeal to *Europe* – clearing his throat again – and we would *much appreciate your support*, what I should have done, of course, was to laugh in his face, or produce some more polite gesture but of similar subtext, as for example enquiring, Europe? or just, Where, sorry? as though genuinely unaware that such an entity existed.

I should have refused. It surely would not have been impossible even for a man who is known to be living alone and enjoying a life of very few *professional commitments* to have found some kind of excuse relative to one of the three designated days when this particular modern coach was to be speeding up interminable kilometres of *autostrada* and *autoroute* to *present our case to Europe*. It should not have been impossible. Yet not only did I not refuse, but I actually leapt at the chance. I said yes immediately. Not only did I not look for an excuse to avoid this tiresome and I suspect hypocritical pilgrimage, but I actually overlooked the perfectly good excuse that did present itself, to wit my daughter's eighteenth birthday, the party to celebrate which will take place tomorrow in my no doubt much-censured absence. And not only, I reflect, as the coach's big engine vibrates beneath my seat – and what I'm trying to do I suppose is to grasp the nettle, all the nettles, just as firmly as ever one can – not only did I accept immediately, by which I mean without a second's mental mediation, on reflex as it were, but I then went out of my way to make my

acceptance affable and even friendly. I said, Why surely, Vikram, of course I'll come, and I signed my name immediately and immediately, without mediation, I reached into my pocket to pull out the new wallet I had recently bought, as I have bought so many new things of the small and vaguely intimate variety of late, and paid immediately (which was quite unnecessary) the two hundred and twenty thousand lire the trip is costing, a sum which frankly, given the present state of my finances, I can ill afford. You can ill afford it, I told myself. Though I must say that money for me of late has been taking on the feel of a currency one is eager to be rid of before moving on to some other country, a currency, that is, that will not be current for much longer, and which it does not even occur to me might be exchangeable.

I paid my money to this Vikram of the dark skin, deep Indian voice and incongruously Welsh accent *immediately* and in order then to explain a readiness which I feared would not be understood (since when have you ever shown any inclination to *fight for the cause?*), I actually went so far as to say that since others were making the very considerable effort to organize this trip on everybody's behalf, the least somebody like myself could do was to *show solidarity* and come along. I could read a book, I said, during the long journey, I had a lot to read for work, for prospective work, or I could just think (just!). And standing there in the spare because institutional room where our encounter took place, amongst graceless office furniture on a stone-patterned linoleum floor indifferently cleaned by a pampered and unmotivated menial staff, standing there talking to this man whose fecklessness rivals even my own, whose only stable relationship appears to be his passion for the mongrel dog whose hairs smother all his shabby clothes, I was trying to reassure him that there was nothing peculiar in my so rapidly subscribing to his *courageous initiative*, that there was nothing peculiar in my eagerly adding my

name to his list of scrawled signatures. I was almost apologizing, for God's sake, for enrolling in his expedition. Or rather, I was already concealing what I already knew in my heart to be the real and only reason for my behaving in this extraordinary and inconsistent fashion, for my agreeing, that is, to come on this ridiculous and pointless trip; the same reason, it should be said, why I have now, even as I sit here churning these thoughts on the back seat of this coach as it inches its way out to one of those nodal points where the motorway system plugs into the city so that one can be sucked off at tremendous speed to some other and in every way similar city – the same reason why I have now suddenly buried my face in a book the words on whose pages I not only do not see but do not even really want to see. For *she* has just stood up to get down her dark leather document-case from the overhead luggage rack. She is in the third seat from the front on the left.

And to think, to think that for more than six months now, or is it a year? I had been speaking of myself (to myself) as a man healed, as a man emerging once and for all from the throes and miseries, and I suppose it has to be added ecstasies, of what I can only refer to as the great crisis, the great adventure, the great collision of my life. Yes, I had begun to look upon myself as that person who has been through it all and emerges the other side 'a happier and a wiser man', who glances back at others crossing life's rapids with a sort of affectionate and satisfying irony. And chattering to myself in my mind, as one does, or buying furniture for my little flat, or purchasing all those little things – my new wallet – that I suddenly felt it sensible to replace, so that life could start anew, free from every encumbering reminder, I would tell myself: Splendid, not even a whiff of albatross, not a hint of that weight and stench you have carried around with you for so long! Yes, the road to excess, I would quote to myself, and I remember doing this with a cheerful complacency that it is embarrassing to recall, the

road to excess – perhaps I would be putting on a CD of Handel or of Mozart (I had been keeping very strict control on my listening material) – truly does lead to the Palace of Wisdom. Though one might have quibbled over the word ‘palace’, I suppose. But even if designations along the lines of ‘service flat’ or ‘hovel’ or even ‘bunker’ would perhaps be more appropriate for the species of wisdom I had arrived at, the point I’m trying to make is that prior to meeting Vikram Griffiths, our Indian Welshman, in the English Institute staffroom that day, I had felt I was cured. No, better still, I felt I had cured myself. There was pride involved. For at no point had I sought help from anyone, had I? No, I had fought my own way out of the flood, born up by the scraps of reason and self-respect one inevitably clutches at once it becomes clear one has no stomach for the darker option. And if, after what seemed a very long time at sea, the surf had set me down at the last in a place that was far away from where I plunged in and quite unknown to me and above all lonelier than any other place I had ever been before, all the same it did give me every impression once I got there, once I closed the door on my tiny apartment, of being *terra firma*, of being, that is, a place of arrival, the kind of place to which the words ‘home and dry’, or at least ‘dry’, might be applicable.

Yes, for six months, I reflect, sitting slightly right of centre on the big back seat of this powerful modern coach setting out across Europe, for six months you have been telling yourself that you are out of the woods, safe, even happy. Not to the point of clapping your hands and stamping your feet, perhaps, but happy enough, happy enough. Until a man for whom you have no particular respect approaches you in your loathsome place of work, an occasional drinking companion, affectedly shabby, determinedly Indian, though brought up entirely Welsh, with a clipboard and a pen in his hand and a nervous over-excited coercive manner manifested above all by his constant throat-clearing and

catarrh-swallowing, his constant fingering of sideburns and baldness, and this man explains to you an *ambitious initiative* for saving the very job you have been trying for years to find the courage to leave, a job that is the source perhaps, when looked at from one angle, of all your woes, and what do you do? What do you do? In the space of a very few seconds you forget the resolve, for such it had seemed, of the last six months and you offer, promptly, immediately, without mediation, your – and these were the very words you used – *personal contribution to the group effort*. And then because you have never, but never, shown the slightest interest in the past in saving this miserable but of course well-paid, fatally well-paid job which has kept us all hanging on here in a limbo without future or return, trapped us in a stagnant backwater where the leaves of falling years turn slowly on themselves as they drift and rot, and because you are sure that this man with the handsome sideburns and balding nervousness never for one moment imagined you would *lend your support*, and in fact only really asked you because you both happened to be in the same room at the same time and he with his clipboard in his hand, you start to make all kinds of affable apologies of the variety, If others are doing so much, the least I could do, etc. and even explaining to him that you won't really be wasting the time because you can take books to read. I have plenty of work I can take, you said in a ludicrous pretence of having *pressing outside interests*, and Vikram Griffiths said: Oh, no need to worry about entertainment, boyo – because Vikram, who has no official role in the foreign teachers' union, yet appears to be the only person who is capable of getting anything done, has this way of calling all males of whatever age 'boyo', as indeed he has of calling all females of whatever age 'girlie', which is part and parcel of declaring his Welshness, his incongruous Welshness, which of course draws attention to his Indianness, his un-Welshness, and also his matey, alcohol-fed nervousness and above all his

alternativeness, his belonging to that *révolution permanente*, as the French like to say, or used to, that army of special and enlightened people, who are now so much an accepted and uninspiring part of our shadow establishment – No need to worry about entertainment, boyo, Vikram Griffiths says, clearing his throat and rubbing his hands together, because almost all the students coming along will be *girlies*, of course. At which point this man, no doubt delighted to have found such an unlikely supporter for his *imaginative initiative*, gives you the kind of wink which is also a leer, the kind of facial contortion, I mean, that a stand-up comedian might wish to cultivate so that not a single member of a huge theatre audience could misunderstand his insinuation. Because part of Vikram Griffiths' manner, I reflect, is to assume, ostentatiously, provocatively, a renegade complicity even with people whom he suspects may be on the other side. In fact, he said, his face still untwisting from its leer, the boys are already calling it The Shag Wagon, and he laughed a throaty, smoke-and-whisky laugh, and sucking in catarrh repeated, *The Shag Wagon*, still laughing, and then was giving me some statistics on what he expected to be the breakdown between the students, mostly girls and numerous, and the foreign teachers, ourselves, mostly men and few, and true to the totally inconsistent and I think I ought to recognize shameful way I was behaving, I am behaving, I laughed too. The Shag Wagon! I shouted with a quite unforgiveable mirth. The fucking *Shag Wagon*, who thought of calling it that? It's brilliant! And Vikram said, Georg thought of it. You know what Georg's like.

Which I did. I do.

And he picked up his list, which already had *her* name and Georg's name signed on it, and, smelling of dog, dog hairs on his shabby jacket, though he can hardly bring the creature into the University, he went across the room to talk to another of my colleagues, while what I was immediately

trying to remember was whether their names, *hers* and Georg's, had been one above the other or one below the other on that list I had just signed and whether they had been written in the same colour and hence perhaps the same pen. And I couldn't remember. As even now, sitting on the back seat of this modern coach setting out towards the putative heart of Europe and forcing my mind's eye to open once again on the moment when I saw that list on his clipboard, the moment I so precipitously and it has to be said pathetically added my name to it, even now I cannot recall whether their names were together, or far apart, and not remembering, but trying so hard to remember, I am obliged for it must be the millionth time to acknowledge how humiliating it is to be throwing all my mental energy at a matter which is of absolutely no importance, and not even pleasurable in the way that so many other matters of absolutely no importance but to which one regularly gives one's mind, as for example billiards, or TV documentaries, or even, though more rarely, one's work, can be, if nothing else, at least pleasurable. Why does a man feel he has to take his dog with him everywhere? I ask myself. Why does a man have to *put himself so much in evidence*? An ugly dog at that. And how could it possibly matter whether *she* and Georg signed the Strasbourg list with the same pen and hence were perhaps together at the moment of signing? How could such a trivial coincidence signify anything at all?

But now I am interrupted by an Italian voice that asks: What are you reading?

For it has to be said that I am very far from being alone on the back seat of this coach. Indeed, if one could be alone, or even hope to be alone, hope that other people would leave one alone, in a modern coach then I would not hate them quite so much, since perhaps what I hate most about coaches is that they imply groups, and one's forced or presumed participation in a group for a given period of time, in the way that, for example, buses or trains or even

aeroplanes do not imply such scenarios, since in those cases everybody buys their tickets separately and separately minds their own separate business. Yes, coaches, I understand now, make me think of groups and the tendency groups have to operate at the level of the lowest, and perhaps not even common, denominator, and what I'm thinking of I suppose is parties of people singing together all in the same state of mind, a church outing perhaps, or old people embarking on package tours to pass the time, or adolescents on the way to support a football team, and, in general, I'm thinking of all the contemporary pieties of getting people together and moving them off in one direction or another to have fun together, or to edify themselves, or to show solidarity to some underprivileged minority and everybody, as I said, being of the same mind and of one intent, every individual possessed by the spirit of the group, which is the very spirit apparently of *humanity*, and indeed of that *Europe*, come to think of it, to which this group is now hurtling off to appeal. Whereas if I recall correctly, and it was from a book *she* once made me read or rather re-read, for she was always making me read books in the hope that I might recover my vocation, might truly become that person, that man (this was important), I had once shown promise of becoming – if I recall correctly, then the first mention of Europe as a geographical entity (was it Theocritus?) referred only to the Peloponnese, and only in order to *distinguish* the Peloponnese from Asia, only to demonstrate that the small peninsula had *not* been swallowed up into the amorphous mass of an ever-invasive Asia. Or so I recall, rightly, or perhaps wrongly, from a book she made me read, re-read, in her insistent and one must suppose laudable attempt to have me recover my vocation, to have me become, perhaps this was the nub, somebody she could respect. It was a claim to distinction, Europe, as I recall.

In any event, I am far from alone, here on the back seat, which is to say that on my right, trapped between myself and the window, I have a rather plain young woman with somehow swollen lips who has been chattering intermittently with the two girls in the seat in front of us and, ignoring myself, with the girl, over made-up, to my left, who is dead in the centre of the coach's, one has to confess, comfortable big back seat, while to her left sits the handsome Georg, a German of Polish extraction, who is exchanging occasional pleasantries with the girl to his left, trapped between himself and the window, and again with the boy and girl in the seat in front of them, one of whom, the girl, is standing up with one knee on her seat and one very long and attractive leg out in the corridor, holding forth absolutely non-stop, in Italian, as is to be expected of a young Italian, on a variety of entirely predictable topics, as for example, the quality of different makes of jeans, including the pair she has on (allowing Georg to examine her leg and plump crotch attentively); the impossibility of finding a place in one of the smaller university classrooms when somebody 'important' (not myself) is lecturing; the credibility of astrology and numerology; the 'stupendous' sound system in a new discothèque recently opened in the small satellite town of Busto Arsizio; and the extraordinary behaviour, in love and out, of her cousin Paola, who studies law at the Cattolica and who, on being left by her boy-friend of long standing, got a friend to phone him in the middle of the night as though from a hospital to say that a girl with red hair (i.e. herself) had been found in a coma after a horrendous car crash, the only piece of identification found on her being a photo of a young man with a phone-number on the back, the boy-friend's - all this to *make him feel sorry for her and guilty about leaving her* and to have him rush off to hospital imagining he would find her dying, whereas in fact what he, the ex-boy-friend, did was to call her parents, who, and particularly the mother, went almost out of their

minds with grief before Paola came in through the front door in an advanced state of drunkenness.

How adolescent that is, I reflect, watching the girl's animated face. And how attractive. You have always had a fatal attraction to adolescent behaviour, I tell myself. Most of your own behaviour, I tell myself, is irretrievably adolescent. And in the meantime this stream, indeed this torrent of juvenile and absolutely indiscriminating, but at least unpretentious chatter has, for the half an hour or so that we have been forcing our way through Milan's cluttered thoroughfares, together of course with an occasional burst of communal song when a new voice takes over on the airwaves crooning without fail of love whether happy or unhappy – this chatter and the singing, sometimes choral, of insipid songs, has so far been offering an excellent cover for what I'm perfectly aware will be perceived as my misanthropic behaviour, sitting silent and slightly off-centre in the back seat of this coach, the only place left unoccupied on my late (studiedly late) arrival, my face buried in a book, an attitude which unfortunately legitimizes the innocent question of the girl in the seat in front.

What are you reading?

This girl must be kneeling on her seat, because her arms are resting quite naturally on the top of the backrest above my face and her rather strong chin is just above her linked hands, head cocked to one side in an expression of friendly enquiry and what the Italians call *disponibilità*, meaning openness, willingness to listen and to help, amenability. And though she is perfectly aware, it seems to me, of this body language, this simple friendliness she is communicating, there could be no question of her having deliberately and carefully adopted it, which is exactly the opposite of so many adults, I reflect, who are often amazingly unaware of what they have indeed been meticulously scheming, as when *she*, I am bound to remember now, told you that though she loved you dearly she felt she needed a little

breathing space on her own before making the kind of decisions that would upset the *vie tranquille* that she and her young daughter had been enjoying since her painful separation from her husband. And her face as she said this had a wonderful warm poignancy about it, yearning would be an appropriate word, an expression I still remember very clearly, as if gazing at a loved one through prison bars, or in fading twilight, with all the intimacy of a love that cannot be, but an expression that time would all too soon reveal as entirely false and hypocritical, knowing what she knew then, as so many of the expressions, I reflect, that you yourself have adopted with your one-time wife and indeed with all those people who at some time and for whatever reason have become important to you and whom at some point in your life you could not have done without, have been entirely false and hypocritical.

I am not reading, I tell the girl in front of me.

But you have a book.

I insist to the perhaps twenty- or twenty-one-year-old girl that though this is self-evident, the fact is that I am not reading the book which, admittedly, I am holding open in my hands.

Why not?

Already, during the course of this brief exchange, I am aware of smiling wryly and generally sending out the kind of friendly, apparently avuncular social messages which I know are expected of me. It's as if I had indeed been reading the book, but had now chosen to say that I was not reading it in order to tease and prolong the conversation, rather than just giving the girl the title of the thing and having done. Indeed it would not greatly surprise me if before very long I weren't telling this pleasant young *studentessa* some small sad half-truths about myself merely in order to appear, as they say, interesting.

I explain to her that I am not reading the novel I hold in my hands, because I already know it to be a tiresome thing

written by a woman who can think of nothing better to do with her very considerable talent than prolong a weary dialectic which presents the authorities as always evil and wrong and her magical-realist, lesbian, ethnic-minority self and assorted revolutionary company as always good and right and engaged, what's more, in a heroic battle where *LIFE* will one day triumph over the evils and violence of an uncomprehending establishment.

Again I smile, warmly, to show that I am perfectly aware that this fierce demolition will seem pompous and presumptuous and even fascist, whereas what I really feel is that my criticism, far from exaggerated, is, if anything, inadequate, since what needs to be said is that people who do nothing more than analyse the world in a way in which it has grown used to being analysed, offering their readers the illusion of participating in a movement that gives them a sense of moral superiority with regard to a society they have no intention of ceasing to subscribe to (as indeed why should they?) – people, whether writers or not, of this variety deserve nothing better than scorn and perhaps a good deal worse.

But it would be unwise to say this. It would be, I have discovered, and indeed it generally is, unwise to say almost any of the things one feels most moved to say. Unless you can somehow present them as a joke.

So why are you reading it? she asks me.

In a pantomime of patience I explain that, as I have already explained, I am not reading it.

But you've got it open.

It was given to me.

She looks at me with big young eyes, wondering if she can ask the question, and perhaps because we're on a coach and hence all part of the same group supporting the same cause, my cause, she feels she can. Who by?

I tell her: Somebody who wanted me to read it.

Clearly she is being teased, and clearly she enjoys being teased. She bounces up and down on her knees, she is young, she smiles, she raises an eyebrow (endearingly bushy), she cocks her head to one side, smooth cheek for just a moment against the synthetic stiff blood-red of the upholstery. Immediately I'm thinking that if I don't tell her who gave me this book, with all that the two words involved would imply, perhaps *I'll have more of a chance* with this young student, a thought which equally immediately short-circuits to have me thinking, uncomfortably, of Georg and of *her*, so expert in the withholding of information, so that in the kind of reflex that isn't so much a decision as a small convulsion of self-recognition followed by fearful rejection (as of one throwing away a cigarette after the first puff), I decide I will tell her who gave me this miserable novel. I will tell her so as to save myself from all equivocation. Just as I open my mouth, she asks, Your girl-friend?

What?

Was it your girl-friend gave you the book?

She smiles warmly. She is being bolder now. She has noticed – I saw her eyes – that I don't wear a ring. I close my mouth, hesitating again, when our conversation, if such we are to call it, is interrupted by an announcement. Vikram Griffiths is standing in the aisle of the coach up front by the driver and he has a microphone in his hand and his mongrel dog at his feet. His voice is harshly, electronically deep, and deeply Welsh: Welcome to y'all! he begins, *benvenuti, bienvenus, willkommen, croeso*, good t'see ya!

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN VIKRAM GRIFFITHS begins to speak, the girl in the seat in front of me, whose great brown eyes are of course like those of a million other Italian girls, not to mention Spanish and Greek and doubtless other races too, by which I mean to say, unique, splendid, eminently replaceable, swivels on her seat to pay attention, and what I'm telling myself now, slightly right of centre in the back seat of this packed coach, assailed by Vikram Griffiths' efficiently amplified, demotic voice, what I'm telling myself is that *I truly am in this now*, in this coach I mean, like it or not, for twelve hours and then the two nights in Strasbourg and then twelve hours in the coach again on the way back, not to mention the danger that it could well be more than twelve hours, depending on traffic and circumstances beyond your control, since of course the moment you set out on the road with other people, the moment you undertake a trip together in a coach, the moment you commit yourself to some joint project, some communal enterprise, circumstances are always well and truly beyond your control.

I'm in. Deeply, inescapably in. We've already left Milan behind, we're on the *autostrada*, speeding along, a solid group of us, so that, as when they bolt the doors on the plane and it moves out onto the runway, there can be no more getting out now before the other end, no more splitting us up into separate sovereign urges and desires. You're in it now, I tell myself, with all these young students, girls for the most part, to either side and in front, beautiful and plain, and Georg next-but-one to my left, plus your other colleagues, liked and disliked, but mostly the latter,

from France and Germany and Spain and Greece and God bless us even Ireland, and with *her* in the third seat from the front, with her dark brown hair and dark brown document-case that she just took down from the overhead rack, the same case where she used to keep such things as her train timetable and the rubbers we used and the photographs we took of ourselves with the time-delay, and then miscellaneous memorabilia of the air-ticket and hotel-bill variety, the receipts for meals I always had to be careful not to put in my own pockets, and my letters of course, my many many letters, some of them ten or even twenty pages long, some of them no more than fragments of poor poetry I had written, or better poetry I had copied out for her but which she never recognized, and later an aerosol can of ammonia spray, as is the way with things that are intense and have to change, things that start well but can't stand still and end badly, very badly, though now no doubt she will have nothing more in there than notepaper for the reflections she is gathering and will be using this trip to gather further, for her research into a possible constitution for a *United Europe* which is part of a competition she has enrolled in to win a *Euro scholarship* for a year's work and study in Brussels, or so I heard from my daughter, a move that she sees as the indispensable next step in her career, for she still thinks of life in terms of career and self-realization, she is still at that stage.

Yes, I am in this now, with all the singing and the toilet stops and the making friends and the exchanging of addresses and the boredom and doubtless the confabulation, as some try to grab more power and responsibility in our little group and others (myself) to refuse it, and the enormous waste of time it will no doubt be going through the bureaucratic procedure of presenting our petition to a European Parliament whose exact functions and powers and suffrage none of us understands, except perhaps *her*, perhaps the Avvocato Malerba, perhaps

Vikram, and on the way back we will all have to discuss the importance of what we have achieved and mythologize it and tell ourselves we did well to come and that now we are safer, meaning that we can feel more secure that we will continue to receive our salaries for some time to come.

Yes, I am caught now, I am not in my small flat where the answering machine vets all the calls and where no photograph, ornament, poster or object of any intimacy whatever dates back before 1993, not in my own private space so dear to me and so dull, but here in the thrall of forty or fifty people. You are caught, I tell myself, trapped. And despite my late arrival, due mainly to a half-hour spent in a café on Corso Sempione debating all the reasons for avoiding this ridiculous excursion (without ever for one moment believing I would avoid it), despite my late arrival and all my misgivings, I must say that the thought that I really am *in this* now is beginning to get me rather excited, it's cheering me up, so that already I am considering indulging in a little fling, an *avventura* as the Italians say, with one, with any one for heaven's sake (for they are all the same to me – how could it be otherwise?) of these young women. You should have an adventure, I tell myself, looking around at the fresh young students, a little fling, in full visibility of everybody, flagrant. By which of course I mean in full and flagrant visibility of *her*. As if such a gesture could in any way upset her! As if she would care, which I know perfectly well she wouldn't. On the contrary she would probably say, if we were to speak to each other at all on this trip, which frankly I doubt, she would probably say how pleased she was that I was having *a healthy sex life*, a notion this, whatever it might mean, that she always advocated and indeed used, as a *precept*, to excuse almost any behaviour, and by any behaviour what I mean I suppose is betrayal, which is surely the most terrible behaviour of all, and the most inevitable it seems sometimes. And this reminds me now how, with her historical studies, so similar

to my own, and her desire for sophistication, or at least to be seen to be sophisticated, she liked to say that European hegemony in the world began with a woman's betrayal, and she meant Helen, Helen's betrayal, which prompted the Achaean triumph and the shift of civilization's centre from east to west, Troy to Athens and thence of course further west to her beloved Paris. Another protagonist. Every epic adventure (I remember her saying this and myself thinking how intelligent she was and how well-read and articulate), every epic adventure turned on a woman's betrayal, of father, family, or husband – Medea, Antigone, Ariadne – and she would laugh her laugh, her liquid French laugh, and whenever history's wheel began to move, she said, it was betrayal set it in motion – Hitler's of Stalin, De Gaulle's of Britain – and she said that so long as we saw our affair in *the wider world perspective* I need never worry about feeling guilty or justifying myself.

She laughed her very French laugh. And if I mention that a second time, the Frenchness of her laugh, it's because I've just remembered that I found her laugh special and I'm trying to remember exactly what it was like, because so often one remembers that something is, was, wonderful or special without being able properly to recall it, or properly to savour it, or understand exactly why it was so. One remembers that one would like to recall it. One remembers in order to be frustrated, in order to savour not the thing itself but its absence, the shape of its absence. And thinking of this while sitting slightly right of centre on the big back seat of this big packed coach with Vikram Griffiths launching into his amplified speech somewhere on the *autostrada* north of Milan, clearing his throat, his ridiculous mongrel dog Dafydd snuffling round his legs, grizzly wet nose patted by all the girls, it occurs to me that one of the main things I fell in love with when falling in love with her was her *foreignness*, and the remarkable thing about this is that I had already fallen in love with foreignness once before, of