Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade (1740-1814)

My manner of thinking, so you say, cannot be approved. Do you suppose I care? A poor fool indeed is he who adopts a manner of thinking for others! My manner of thinking derives directly from my considered reflections; it holds with my existence, with the way I am made. It is not in my power to alter, and if it were, I'd not do so. This manner of thinking you find fault with is my sole consolation in life; it alleviates all my sufferings in prison, it composes all my pleasures in the world outside, it is dearer to me than life itself. Not my manner of thinking but the manner of thinking of others has been the source of my unhappiness. If then, as you tell me, they are willing to restore my liberty if I am willing to pay for it by the sacrifice of my principles or my tastes, we may bid one another an eternal adieu; for rather than part with those I would sacrifice a thousand lives and a thousand liberties, if I had them. These principles and these tastes – I am their fanatic adherent; and fanaticism in me is the product of the persecutions I have endured from my tyrants. The longer they continue their vexations, the deeper in my heart are my principles rooted; and I openly declare that no-one need ever talk to me of liberty if it is offered to me only in return for their destruction. I say this to you. I shall say it to the entire world. And were the very scaffold before me, I'd not change my tune.

– Letter to Madame de Sade (November 1783)
Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843)

O you well-known to me, enchanting one,
You terrible flame! How quietly you dwell,
Now here, now there, how you hide from yourself,
Flee yourself – you, the soul of all that lives!
Live now for me, and be at last revealed,
No longer hide, bound spirit, from my sight,
Grow bright for me, for I do not fear you.
For death is what I seek. It is my right.

– Empedocles (1800)
William Blake (1757-1827)

When Klopstock England defied,
Up rose terrible Blake in his pride;
For old Nobodaddy aloft
Farted & Belched & cough'd,

Then swore a great oath that made heav'n quake,
And call'd aloud to English Blake.
Blake was giving his body ease
At Lambeth beneath the poplar trees;

From his seat then started he
And turn'd himself round three times three.
The Moon at that sight blush'd scarlet red,
The stars threw down their cups & fled,

And all the devils that were in hell
Answered with a ninefold yell.
Klopstock felt the intripled turn,
And all his bowels began to churn,

And his bowels turned round three times three,
And lock'd in his soul with a ninefold key,
That from his body it ne'er could be parted
Till to the last trumpet it was farted.

Then again old Nobodaddy swore:
He ne'er had seen such a thing before,
Since Noah was shut in the ark,
Since Eve first chose her hell-fire spark,
Since 'twas the fashion to go naked,
Since the old anything was created;
And so feeling he beg'd him to turn again,
And ease poor Klopstock's nine-fold pain.

From pity then he reden'd round
And the Spell removed unwound.
If Blake could do this when he rose up from shite,
What might he not do if he sat down to write?

– Nobodaddy (c. 1800-1810)
Imagine my surprise when I suddenly awoke from a dream of several weeks that was as bizarre as it was unexpected. I had been mad, that much is certain; that is, if one can apply the sorry term 'madness' to my condition, given the fact that my memory remained entirely intact and that not for a single moment did I lose my powers of reasoning. What took place in my head was rather a carnival of all philosophies and all gods. I thought I myself was God, and I merely considered myself trapped in some sorry incarnation. There were, none the less, spirits who propelled me into the stars and with whom I conversed by means of figures traced on walls, or with stones and leaves which I gathered on the ground – as do all lunatics, as a matter of fact. The thing that was the most astonishing, and which sustained my illusions to such an extent, was that the other lunatics seemed so perfectly rational to me, and that we were perfectly able to explain our actions to each other; whereas the doctors and our friends seemed to us utterly blind and unreasonable. You can see spirits who talk to you in broad daylight, at night you see perfectly shaped, perfectly distinct phantoms, you think you remember having lived in other forms, you imagine you are growing very tall and that your head is touching the stars, the horizon of Saturn or Jupiter spreads before your eyes, bizarre creatures appear before you with all the characteristics of real beings; but what is most frightening is that others see them just as you do! If it is the imagination that creates a world imbued with such reality, if it is a kind of magnetic harmony that places several minds in the sway of the same vision, this is less strange
than the supposition that there might be immaterial beings at work around us. If the mind has to become completely unhinged in order to place us in communication with another world, it is clear that the mad will never be able to prove to the sane how blind they are, to say the very least! In fact, when I regained my health, I was deprived of that temporary illumination which allowed me to understand my companions in misfortune; even the majority of the ideas that assailed me without end disappeared with the fever, taking away with them the small amount of poetry which had awoken in my head. I must tell you, however, that I spoke in verse throughout the day, and that these verses were very beautiful.

– Letter to Victor Loubens (1841)

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

The world is about to end. The only reason for it to continue is that it exists. And how feeble is that reason compared to those that announce the contrary, and particularly to this: What is the world to do from now on under heaven? Even supposing that it continued to exist materially, would it be an existence worthy of the name or the Historical Dictionary? I do not say that the world will be reduced to the expedients and clownish disorder of the South American republics, or even that we shall perhaps return to a savage state, roaming the overgrown ruins of our civilization, gun in hand, searching for our food. No, for these adventures would still suppose a certain vital energy, an echo of earlier ages. The new example and new victims of inexorable moral laws, we shall perish by that by which we have believed in living. Machinery will have so Americanised us, progress will have so atrophied in us all that is spiritual, that nothing in the bloody, sacrilegious or unnatural dreams of the Utopians will be comparable to the result. I appeal to every thinking man to show me what remains of life. As for religion, I believe it is useless to speak of it or to search for its remains, since to give oneself the trouble of denying God is the only scandal in these matters. But the time will come when humanity, like an avenging ogre, will tear their last morsel from those who believe themselves to be the legitimate heirs of revolution. And even that will not be the supreme evil.

Human imagination can conceive, without undue difficulty, of republics or other communal states worthy of a certain glory, if they are led by holy men or certain
aristocrats. But it is not specifically in political institutions that the universal ruin or the universal progress – for the name matters little – will manifest itself. That will be in the debasement of the human heart. Need I say that what remains of politics will struggle painfully in the clutches of a general animality, that our leaders will be forced, in order to maintain themselves and to create the ghost of an order, to resort to means that will make today’s humanity, hardened as it is, shudder? Then any resemblance to virtue, everything, indeed, that is not the worship of Pluto, will be brought into utter ridicule. These times are perhaps very near; who knows if they are not already here, and if the coarseness of our nature is not the only obstacle that prevents us from appreciating the atmosphere in which we breathe?

– Fusées (c. 1857)

Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont (1846-1870)

Oh! if instead of being a hell this universe had been but an immense celestial anus – behold the gesture I make, hard by my lower abdomen: yes, I would have plunged my prick through its blood-stained sphincter, smashing the very walls of its pelvis with my impetuous movements! Misfortune would not then have blown into my blinded eyes entire dunes of shifting sand; I would have discovered the subterranean place where truth lies sleeping, and the rivers of my viscous sperm would thus have found an ocean in which to rush headlong!

– Les Chants de Maldoror (1869)
Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)

Toy of this sad eye of water, I cannot pluck,
O motionless boat! oh! arms too short! either this
or the other flower: neither the yellow, which bothers me,
there; nor the blue, friend to the ash-coloured water.

Ah! dust of the willows shaken by a wing!
The roses of the reeds devoured long ago!
My boat, still stuck; and its chain caught
At the bottom of this rimless eye of water – in what mud?

– Mémoire (1872)
For the past five years or so – I don’t know how long exactly – I have been more or less without permanent employment, wandering from pillar to post. You will say that, ever since such and such a time, I have been going downhill, I have been feeble, I have done nothing. But is that entirely true?

What is true is that I have at times earned my own crust, and at other times a friend has given it to me out of the goodness of his heart. I have lived whatever way I could, for better or for worse, taking things just as they came. It is true that I have forfeited the trust of various people; it is true that my financial affairs are in a sorry state; it is true that my future looks rather bleak; it is true that I might have done better; it is true that I have wasted time when it comes to earning a living; it is true that my studies are in a fairly lamentable and appalling state, and that my needs are greater, infinitely greater, than my resources. But does that mean going downhill and doing nothing?

Please don’t think that I am renouncing anything. I am reasonably faithful in my unfaithfulness, and although I have changed, I am still the same. What preys on my mind is simply this one question: what am I good for, could I not be of service or use in some way; how can I become more knowledgeable and study some subject or other in depth? That is what keeps preying on my mind, you see, and then one feels imprisoned by poverty, barred from taking part in this or that project, and all sorts of necessities are out of one’s reach. As a result of which, one cannot rid oneself of melancholy, one feel’s emptiness where there might have been friendship and sublime and genuine affection, and
one feels dreadful disappointment gnawing at one's spiritual energy, fate seems to stand in the way of affection, or one feels a wave of disgust welling up inside. And then one says: how long, my God!

I do know that there is a release, the belated release. But a justly or unjustly ruined reputation, poverty, disastrous circumstances, misfortune; they all turn you into a prisoner. You cannot always tell what keeps you confined, what immures you, what seems to bury you, and yet you can feel those elusive bars, railings, walls. Is all this illusion, imagination? I don't think so. And then one asks: my God, will it be for long, will it be forever, will it be for eternity?

– Letter to Theo van Gogh (July 1880)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. 'Has he got lost?' asked one. 'Did he lose his way like a child?' asked another. 'Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated?' – Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

'How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what
sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.'

– Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (1882)

Henry Miller (1891-1980)

Once the separation is made a new orbit is established, and there is no turning back. For me the sun had ceased to exist; I had myself become a blazing sun. And like all the other suns of the universe I had to nourish myself from within. I speak in cosmological terms because it seems to me that is the only possible way to speak if one is truly alive. I think this way also because it is just the opposite of the way I thought a few years back when I had what is called hopes. Hope is a bad thing. It means that you are not what you want to be. It means that part of you is dead, if not all of you. It means that you entertain illusions.

– The Cosmological Eye (1939)
Georges Bataille (1897-1962)

Being burns in the night from being to being, and it burns all the brighter if love has collapsed the prison walls enclosing each of us: but what can be greater than the breach through which two beings recognise one another, free of the vulgarity and platitudes introduced by the infinite? He who at least loves beyond the grave – in doing so, he has also escaped the vulgarity proper to daily relations, but never were those too constricting bonds more surely broken than by Laure: pain, horror, tears, delirium, orgy, fever, and then death were the daily bread Laure shared with me, and this bread leaves me the memory of a tenderness, fearful but immense; it was the form assumed by a love eager to exceed the limits of things, and yet, how many times together did we attain moments of unrealisable happiness, starry nights, flowing streams: in the forest of Lyons at nightfall, she walked beside me in silence, I looking at her unseen; have I ever known greater certainty of what life holds in response to the most unfathomable movements of the heart? I watched my destiny moving forward beside me in the dark; no words can express how clearly I recognised her: nor can I express how beautiful Laure was; her imperfect beauty the moving image of an ardent and uncertain destiny. The brilliant transparency of such nights is equally inexpressible. But at the very least, he who loves beyond the grave has the right to deliver the love within him from its human limits and, without hesitation, give to it a meaning apparently inconceivable for anything else.

– Journal (September 1939)
NOTE

*Der Zauberlehrling* (1797) is the title of a famous poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a re-telling of an ancient Egyptian myth that was later put to music by the French composer Paul Dukas in his orchestral scherzo *L'Apprenti sorcier* (1897). The latter is also the title of a text published in 1938 by Georges Bataille, who adopted it to describe a lineage to which he saw himself heir, and which comprised the poets, writers and artists who, in both their lives and their works, sought to accede to the totality of existence. As the names that carry this lineage testify, such an existence can only be reached through a violent loss of self. Sade was incarcerated by the state for half his life, Goya imprisoned by deafness for half of his; Blake was dismissed as a madman, and Baudelaire was prosecuted for his work; van Gogh, Ducasse and Rimbaud all lived brief lives of wild desperation; Hölderlin, Nerval and Nietzsche paid the ultimate price of their sanity. As a destiny, this is as far from the lures of art and literature as it is from the aims of scientific or political practice. In opposition to which, Bataille advocated a return to the world of myth, in whose cyclical time he saw the plenitude of a total existence beyond the linear time of history. As distinct from the man of science, who comprehends a world of objects, the man of fiction, who creates a dream world in its place, and the man of action, who seeks to transform the world on the basis of this comprehension and in accordance with dreams that invariably become the nightmare of history, this is the sovereign attitude of what Bataille, in this text, called 'The Sorcerer’s Apprentice'.
Caverne des Trois Frères, Montesquieu-Avantès, Ariège.