

The small cove with its small beach, cut off from the world by two miniature promontories, was my retreat from myself during those three days of holiday. The beach was reached by a crudely built stairway that began with wooden steps at the top and continued, halfway down, with steps cut directly into the rock, with a rusty iron handrail for support. And each time I went down that old stairway, and especially on the part made of stone, I stepped out of my own existence and found myself.

Occultists say (or at least some of them do) that the soul has supreme moments when it recalls, with the emotions or with some part of memory, a moment or an aspect or a shadow from a previous incarnation. And since the soul returns to a time that is closer than the present to the beginning and origin of things, it experiences a sensation of childhood and of liberation.

In descending that now little-used stairway and slowly stepping out on to the forever deserted beach, it was as if I were using some magical technique to find myself nearer the monad that I perhaps am. Certain aspects and characteristics of my daily existence – represented in my normal self by desires, aversions, worries – vanished from me like fugitives from the law, fading into the shadows beyond recognition, and I attained a state of inward distance in which it was hard to remember yesterday or to believe that the self that lives in me day after day really belongs to me. My usual emotions, my regularly irregular habits, my conversations with others, my adaptations to the world's social order – all of this seemed like things I'd read somewhere, like inert pages of a published biography, or details from some novel, in one of the middle chapters we read while thinking about something else, and the story-line slackens until it finally slithers away on the ground.

There on the beach, with no sound but that of the ocean waves and of the wind passing high overhead, like a large invisible aeroplane, I experienced dreams of a new sort – soft and shapeless things, marvels that made a deep impression, without images or emotions, clear like the sky and the water, and reverberating like the white whorls of ocean rising up from the depths of a vast truth: a tremendously slanting blue in the distance that acquired glistening, muddy-green hues as it approached, breaking with a great hissing its thousands crashing arms to scatter them over darkish sand where they left dry foam, and then gathering into itself all undertows, all return journeys to that original freedom, all nostalgias for God, all memories (like this one, shapeless and painless) of a prior state, blissful because it was so good or because it was different, a body made of nostalgia with a soul of foam, repose, death, the everything or the nothingness which – like a huge ocean – surrounds the island of castaways that is life.

And I slept without sleeping, already straying from what I'd seen through my feelings, a twilight of myself, a ripple of water among trees, the peace of wide rivers, the coolness of sad evenings, the slow panting in the white breast of the childhood sleep of contemplation.

– Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

For fourteen successive years the gardens at Bilignin were my joy, working in them during the summers and planning and dreaming of them during the winters. The summers frequently commenced early in April with the planting, and ended late in October with the last gathering of the winter vegetables. Bilignin surrounded by mountains and not far from the French Alps – from higher ground a few miles away Mont Blanc was frequently visibly – made early planting uncertain. One year we lost the first planting of string beans, another year the green peas were caught by late frost. It took me several years to know the climate and quite as many more to know the weather. Experience is never at a bargain price. Then too I obstinately refused to accept the lore of the farmers, judging it, with the prejudice of a townswoman, to be nothing but superstition. They told me never to transplant parsley, and not to plant it on Good Friday. We did it in California, was my weak reply. They said not to plant at the moment of the new or full moon. The seeds would be as indifferent as I was, was my impatient answer to this. But it was not. Before the end of our tenancy of the lovely house and gardens at Bilignin, I had become not only weather-wise but a fairly successful gardener.

In the spring of 1929 we became tenants of what had been the manor of Bilignin. We were enchanted with everything. But after careful examination of the two large vegetable gardens – the lower on a level with the terrace garden in front of the house, and the other on a considerably higher level and a distance from the court and portals – it was to my horror that I discovered the state they were in. Nothing but potatoes had been planted the year before. Poking about with a heavy stick, there seemed to be some resistance in a corner followed by a rippling movement. The rubbish and weeds would have to be cleaned out at once. In six days the seven men we mobilised in the village had accomplished this. In the corner where I had poked, a snake's nest and several snakes had been found. But so were raspberries and strawberries.

(...) The weeds remained a tormenting, backbreaking experience all the summers we spent at Bilignin. After the autumn gathering was over, the topsoil would be renewed. Fortunately there was plenty of water. Only once was there a drought, when the ox carts brought water in barrels from the stream in the valley below. For watering we had bought three hundred feet of hose.

The work in the vegetables – Gertrude Stein was undertaking for the moment the care of the flowers and box hedges – was a full-time job and more. Later it became a joke, Gertrude Stein asked me what I saw when I closed my eyes, and I answered, Weeds. That, she said, was not the answer, and so weeds were changed to strawberries. The small strawberries, called by the French wood strawberries, are not wild but cultivated. It took me an hour to gather a small basket for Gertrude Stein's breakfast. And later when there was a plantation of them in the upper garden our young guests were told that if they cared to eat them they should do the picking themselves.

The first gathering of the garden in May of salads, radishes and herbs made me feel like a mother about her baby – how could anything so beautiful be mine. And this emotion of wonder filled me for each vegetable as it was gathered every year. There is nothing that is comparable to it, as satisfactory or as thrilling, as gathering the vegetables one has grown. (...)

– Alice B. Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*

(...) For when we take rational steps to suspend the operation of the rational mind, the inhibition does not result in chaos, but in the apprehension of the Universe by means of a faculty to which the laws of the Reason do not apply; and when, returning to the normal state, we seek to analyse our experience, we find that the description abounds in rational absurdities. (...)

– Aleister Crowley, *Little Essays Towards Truth*