THE BOX

Preface

I am an old man now, and my memory fails me. I have entered the autumn of my life. Old friends fall around me like fellow leaves from the same oak. Soon winter will come, I will fall too, and return to the dust of the earth.

It is ironic — and perverse maybe — that the death of my dear friend Benoît should have caused me any joy. But in the midst of my grief, a plain box brought me a ray of light.

In the bottom drawer of a cabinet in his house was a box, a simple wooden box. A maid found it when the time came to sift through his belongings: just a rectangular box, with no decoration and no engravings, no handles and no feet. On the lid was a note instructing whomever would find it to deliver it to me without opening it. The maid gave it to Benoît’s daughter, and his daughter to me.

It was the last thing they found when they looked through his affairs. The main bedroom had been cleaned out and so had the dining room, the waiting rooms, the servants’ quarters, and even the library. Had it not been for a nosy maid looking for some forgotten jewelry to stuff into her apron, the cabinet might have ended up in a fire, with the box in it. Or some poor soul
might have chopped it up into a stool and a fishing rod, and thrown the box into a river.

But providence be praised: the box was saved. And through the loving diligence of Benoît’s daughter I received it, unopened, in good shape, and with all its contents intact.

In the box were two piles of folded papers: forty years of correspondence Benoît had dutifully preserved through wars, disease, old age, and now even through death. All the letters I had ever sent him were there, neatly folded and piled in chronological order on the left side of the box. Some of them were quite recent. Others were yellow with age and felt like parchment to the touch. On the right side of the box were all his letters to me, painstakingly copied one by one and arranged in the same order as the other pile, a meticulous record of our lifelong conversation, intended to live eternally inside a wooden box, even after both of us would be dead and our names forgotten.

It has now been a month since I received the box and I have spent most of my days reading and re-reading our correspondence. The letters have brought me a mix of grief and happiness. Some of them rekindled for an instant the zest of our youth, others plunged me back into the pain of long-healed wounds, reviving old calamities and distant crises.

The earlier letters are the most faithful to the image I kept of Benoît through these forty years: the image not of a face, but of a handwriting. A dry, angular, spare handwriting, with regular letters that were neither too small nor too big, neither rushed nor cautious. A steady, peaceful script that was never unnecessary curled or hyperbolic, even when all of Paris was consumed for a whole season with a passion for flamboyant calligraphy after the young King remarked on the elegance of Madame de Lauray’s signature.

Towards the bottom of the pile, Benoît’s writing becomes more irregular. At first his usual angular style is still evident, even as the lines start to wander and the letters run into each other. But as weakness and disease settled in, so the letters become compact, tortured graffiti penned by the trembling hand
of an old man. Even towards the very end something of Benoît’s
even-paced handwriting occasionally shows through — the bar
through a \( t \), the arches of an \( m \) — as if to tell me that it is the
hand that deserted him and not the soul.

Of the hundreds of letters in Benoît’s box, several dozen deal
with nothing but births, betrothals, marriages, deaths, and other
family joys and tragedies, interspersed with the occasional com-
ment on the latest fashionable frenzy in the capital. Dozens more
contain requests for advice and pieces of personal wisdom, from
dishonest servants to failed crops in the countryside, dowries,
and repairing broken door locks and mechanical music boxes.

A great number of letters, of course, contain long discus-
sions — sometimes over months or years — of the matters that
occupied our lives and our minds as men of science: optics, astron-
omy, questions about the souls of plants and animals. Quite
a few also debate the merits of various classical and modern
poets, particularly of Clément Marot, whom Benoît greatly ad-
mired, and whose works he fervently maintained were superior
to Ronsard’s. To my sadness, the majority of my own letters bring
up episodes I have now completely forgotten, and sometimes
develop arguments I would be incapable of rephrasing today.

Of those hundreds of letters, a few must have stood out enough
in Benoît’s mind for him to place them together in an envelope,
which I found in the middle of the pile of other letters.

The letters preserved in the envelope were written over
twenty-five years ago, and they relate events that took place still
many more years earlier. Many of the sheets are now discolored
and cracked, and the ink looks gray and faded. Even in my mind
the ink of time must have faded, for I have little recollection of
the events described in those letters.

That small piece of our correspondence contains little men-
tion of family events, and not much about life in the capital. No
calligraphy, no servants, no children, no receptions, no plugged
chimneys or runaway horses. In fact, it is so self-contained and
bears so little on anything extrinsic to its own story that, it seems
to me, it could as well have been written two hundred years ago in a country two thousand leagues away, had it been our lot to live in such time and place.

I do not know if Benoît intended for me to publish those letters, or if he just thought them special at the time, put them in an envelope twenty-five years ago and then forgot about them. Perhaps, on the contrary, he wanted them to remain secret and for their contents to accompany him into death and oblivion. Perhaps he had a different purpose still. I do not know if he wanted me to ponder them or burn them, read them or bury them, serve as a beacon of truth or a warning post on the path to error.

But I do know that I am an old man, and that my memory fails me. Soon, I will be returned to the dust of the earth. And some day eventually so will this wooden box and with it forty years of records of two men’s thoughts, even if the paper should outlive me by hundreds of years.

So as winter presses nearer, before the last leaf falls from the old oak, before I join my dear friend Benoît in his eternal silence, I offer these letters to the public for the edification of the curious and the satisfaction of the faithful. Perhaps as the ages pass upon these letters the purpose of their preservation will become manifest.
Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Before you even remind me, I know that I have announced my return to Paris many times and never made good on it. For having cried wolf so often, I now think you might hardly believe my presence even if I appeared in person on the porch of your house.

But believe it or not, I expect to be back in Paris in a few weeks. If I manage to settle my affairs here as quickly as I hope to, I could be back before Christmas. By then, hopefully, Hélène’s leg will have improved enough to allow us to travel comfortably, and there will be nothing keeping us here. For now she can hardly leave her chair and although she does not complain, I sense she must be suffering.

In the meantime, I am spending my days in relative boredom. I have had my fill of being invigorated by the country air, and if it were not for my dear Hélène, I would soon be no more competent at conversing intelligently than the cows and goats that surround us.

In any case, I am at least free to daydream, reminisce about the past, and prophesy at will about the future. Usually the empty hours of the afternoon yield nothing more than idle nonsense. But today, the season’s first snowflakes reminded me of an episode many years ago that troubled me at the time, and that I do not recall having recounted to you. If you would therefore forgive me for bringing you news that are almost as old as your eldest daughter, I claim permission to abuse your time and your patience as a reader to take an old story off my mind.

The winter of 16— was a snowy one, you may recall. I had been exchanging a lively correspondence with Mr. Foulquières, the abbot of Luzirac, who was interested in my views on the souls of plants and animals. I assumed the abbot was chiefly interested in the particulars of plants and animals, for he was an accom-
plished naturalist himself, and only peripherally in the question of the soul. But a letter I received in October proved me wrong. Not only had the abbot been interested all along in my views about the soul, but it now seemed as though he had feigned to be concerned with the material aspects of plants and animals, perhaps to trick me or test me. To test what? A commitment to the question, an awareness of something? Who knows. I did not think about it very much at the time. Whatever the case might have been, he invited me to visit him at the Abbey of Luzirac, which surprised and delighted me.

It so happened that I had business to conduct in that part of the kingdom that autumn, so I replied to the abbot that I would gladly visit him and that he could expect me in late November or early December as I would stop there on my way back to Paris.

Luzirac is a very small village. In fact, it is hardly more than the abbey itself. Had I consulted a map, I would have realized that it lies fairly high in the mountains and that snow in late autumn was not only possible, but likely. But good maps are hard to find in the provinces. In any case, it so happened that I arrived in Luzirac in early December, early enough to see a few tardy farmers harvest the season’s last crops in the valley, but late enough that it began snowing as I climbed up the hills to the abbey.

By the time I had reached the abbey and met Abbot Foulquières, it was late afternoon, and it was snowing so heavily that one could hardly see the tip of one’s own gloves. After my first meal as the abbot’s guest, the abbey’s crude stone cloister seemed warm and welcoming compared to the tempest outside. That night, I spent a long time in front of the fire. I remember thinking the abbey was an island, or a ship adrift in a sea of white, for it truly felt like the rest of the world had vanished as I had entered.

As it turns out, the snow ended up detaining me at the abbey for several days, during which Abbot Foulquières and I had some intriguing conversations. So intriguing in fact that I wonder if they are properly to be called conversations. But in any case, those conversations are what I meant to write about. Of
course, I do not want to burden you with strange stories when you have many other things to turn your attention to. But if what I have said so far is sufficient to pique your interest and you would like me to write more, I will be honored to oblige.

I wish you the best until I hear back from you. It looks likely that I will miss seeing the performance of that latest tragedy everyone seems to be talking about in Paris. I can hardly tell you how far away Paris and its theaters seem from here. Sometimes I think no-one in this entire province has ever been to a theater or any place of that sort. In any case I will be counting on you to keep me informed and to give me your educated judgment on the play.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT
Second Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, and that Hélène’s health is improving. I was going to write about my impressions of the latest plays I saw. But on second thought, burdening you with a report on this season’s latest display of frivolity is doing it too great an honor.

The little world of Parisian theater seems to be made of air and ale. If there is any substance to it, it is invisible and untouchable. For each mouth that sings and acts, there are five mouths frothing with enough empty praise to cloak the heart of the matter in a fog of nonsense, like these ales from Flanders that seem to turn into a cloud of foam as soon as they are poured into a glass, leaving of the liquor only the sound and the smell.

In any case, I can hardly recall any of the plays without drawing a yawn, any of the actors without feeling the buzz of a thousand flies in my ears, and any of the playwrights without smelling what attracts all these flies. So I hope you will forgive me if I leave to themselves those self-anointed kings of a season without feeling like I should hold their cup. As the saying goes: “it pains me to praise someone who has no merit, and I do not anoint the head of sinners with oil.”

Your adventures in Luzirac, on the other hand, titillate what taste is left in me for the bizarre and the incongruous after a season spent dulling my senses in the theaters of the capital.

I must say that the names of Luzirac and Abbot Foulquières had not entered my mind in a long time, and even then they had hardly ever claimed any prominence. Luzirac has never evoked in me much more than what you have already described: a stone abbey perched atop a hill in a remote mountain village. As for Abbot Foulquières, I knew of him, of course, but our paths never crossed—beyond names in a conversation, that is.
So please, do tell your story. You will find in me a fresh and open mind even for very old news, and having so little stake in this distant matter, whatever truths you wish to impress upon me I will gladly entertain and treat as my own.

Your ever-curious friend and servant,

PIERRE
Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Hélène feels better already, but I think it will be a while before she can walk more than a few steps. As for me, I think I know every cow, every tree, and every stone in the province by now, and I should add every cloud in the sky and every star in the night, for I have looked up and watched them so much in my boredom that I feel as though I have shed earth and time for a life of celestial contemplation. Hardly any words now pass my lips but morning greetings and psalms. By now I have said them so often that they may well continue to spring forth from my mouth even if I were dead, like the water of a well springs without end through the stone of a fountain, though the stone is dead.

Had it been my lot to be gifted with the knowledge of tongues, I would have plenty enough time to translate the whole psalter into measured verse in the language of the Tartars, the Turks, or perhaps the naturals of Peru. I hear even the English and the Scots have now set it with mingled voices in their vulgar tongue for the benefit of their assemblies.

But having neither the knowledge nor the talent to undertake such endeavors, I am left to let my tongue run and watch the clouds drift. Perhaps I should some day write a treatise on clouds. In any case, I promised you a story, so I will make good on my word. Let us, therefore, go back to the abbey at Luzirac.

As I told you, I arrived late and it was snowing heavily. So heavily, in fact, that I could not tell when night fell, for the excess of white brought about its own sort of darkness. So thick and opaque was the whiteness of the afternoon that it stole dusk’s entry and obfuscated any boundary between day and night.

The abbot had arranged a private room for me. It smelled like must, autumn leaves, and cold ashes. Perhaps someone had earlier hung laundry there to dry. I briefly walked around the
square cloister, which was empty and wet. Nearest the door of the chapel I smelled damp rust, nails, cold iron keys, and door hinges. Near the dormitory, fresh pine and hay. By the presbytery, horses. And finally, in front of the dining hall, I smelled a duck roasting in the night like a beacon.

After dinner I remained alone in the dining hall with the abbot. I resolved to spare him the frivolity of my chatter and to let him guide our conversation, out of respect for my host and regard for the holiness of the venue—but also, I must confess, out of sheer curiosity for the abbot’s motives for inviting me.

To my surprise, the abbot began speaking not about the souls of plants and animals, not about the abbey’s spiritual work, not even about meteors or geometry, but about theater. I had not come to Luzirac expecting to discuss theater in an abbey, especially one engulfed in snow, several days’ walk removed from the nearest provincial entertainment hall, even in good weather.

But I believe the abbot had not chosen the topic by coincidence. He asked what I thought of the latest plays I had seen in Paris. I told him, as you most likely would have, that Parisian theaters were full of smoke and hot air, and that all I could see there was so mannered and so false that if there was something else to see, I had failed to perceive it.

He remained silent for a while, but then added that Saint Bonaventure describes theater as a recipient of a certain kind of heavenly light: of all the different kinds of heavenly light, theater is apparently filled with the kind of light that shines on skills that complete the deficiencies of man’s body.

I am not sure I understand why Bonaventure considered theater a skill that completes a deficiency of man, nor why the abbot brought him up, but at least I believe the reference is accurate. The abbot also pointed out that Hugh of Saint Victor, before Bonaventure, lists theater in his Didascalicon among the mechanical arts, together with weaving, armory, agriculture, hunting, navigation, and medicine.

To tell you the truth, having traveled all day I was quite tired, and I did not have the wherewithal to debate the question further with the abbot, nor the audacity to dispute his interpre-
tation of Bonaventure’s theory, nor anything intelligent to add about Hugh of Saint Victor’s views on theater and armory and whatnot. So I went to bed, and resolved to continue the conversation the next day.

But I realize I have perhaps abused your curiosity and corrupted my promise of a good story into a droning account of what must sound to you like a seminary lecture. So I will cease robbing your time, and leave you to your affairs for now, in the hope of having secured, if not your entertainment, then at least your indulgence.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT
Dear Benoît,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, as well as Hélène. Indeed your account of your visit to Luzirac is not taking the turn I had expected. I thought that, in our day and age, monasteries mostly occupied themselves with making goat cheese and plum liquor. But I see that they still have libraries and that there are people who have spent time in them.

And by no means should you imagine that I find your story boring. On the contrary: I could hardly have imagined that Abbot Foulquières had invited you to Luzirac to speak about theater. Nor, to be honest, have I heard anyone mention theater and Saint Bonaventure in the same sentence in as long as I can remember. I would not presume to guess whether Abbot Foulquières himself has ever set foot in a theater, but I after the latest season I must conclude that, had I wanted my senses excited and my mind set in motion, I would have been better served traveling to Luzirac in the snow to speak about theater with the abbot than seeing the real thing on stage in Paris.

That being said, I am curious to know where the abbot’s comments led you. While it is perhaps not my place to argue with his interpretation, I note that Bonaventure describes theater — as well as the other mechanical arts for that matter — as a recipient of heavenly light. This is in fact what the abbot himself pointed out, if I read your letter carefully. And indeed, without dragging the conversation too heavy-handedly back to the subject of optics, it strikes me that an object that is a recipient of light does not itself emit light, and therefore that it is dark. Or is my reasoning flawed?

Unfortunately Bonaventure does not tell us whether he finds that, by receiving heavenly light, the mechanical arts absorb it or reflect it. And indeed we can hardly fault the generations that have preceded us in faith — especially with such awesome in-
sight as Bonaventure — for having done so with the tools of their day, knowing nothing about optics, and without the benefit of the light that modern science sheds on Creation, so to speak. But the question remains, of course, since in one case theater is a dark art, in which we can hope to see nothing, namely if it does absorb heavenly light. Whereas in the other case theater sends us a faint reflection of the light of God, and while that makes it far from a heavenly mirror, at least there is a bit more to see in it than in the dark bottom of a deep well.

But I am letting myself be carried away, as if you could relay my comments to the abbot, forgetting that you are telling me a story that took place many years ago and that, for all I know, the abbot might now be long dead. I hope you will at least take my transports as a sign that I am not bored of your story, and that I look forward to the excitement of reading your next letter.

Your friend and servant,

PIERRE
Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Hélène is improving slowly but still spends most of her days chairbound, doing handiwork in her room. As for me, I am too idle to be either well or unwell, and sometimes I am so bored that I forget if I am awake or asleep. I catch myself envying the enthusiasm Virgil found in agriculture, and the poetic inspiration Pliny drew from his country estate. For, alas, my coarse and unimaginative eyes do not see it: I stir this way and that, I fret, I sigh, no verses come to my mind from the buzzing of the bees, and no songs from the whispering of the brook — nothing, in fact, but impatience, for all I see is insects and water. Perhaps I am too much of a scientist and not enough of a poet.

In any case, I wish the trivial matters of this estate could settle themselves without my intervention, or that I had the good fortune of deriving my income from land a bit closer to Paris. Surely some people have estates a day’s ride away, and they do not have to spend months at a time in this sort of place?

I wonder how people manage who have acquired estates in the New World. I imagine things there go wrong as often as they do here, or even more often perhaps. The owners obviously never visit the land, and I suppose they leave its administration to the care of adventurers. To me this seems no more reliable than pouring money into the sea and hoping it will be returned tenfold.

In any case, you see to what idle musings I am reduced. Had I known I would be detained here so long, I would have brought my lute with me, so that at least there I could compete with Virgil’s bees and brooks, and perhaps accompany a bleating goat or two.

But I had promised a good story, or at least secured your indulgence for a mediocre one, and here I am, keeping you wait-
ing while I speak nonsense. Let me therefore return to the abbey at Luzirac and deliver the story I had promised.

After my first night at the abbey, I woke up to the sound of dawn coming into my room. I knew it as soon as I heard it: a characteristic faint rustle, an indistinct morning murmur which, by a slight change of tone, signals that day has broken, night has receded, and the outside world has turned busy rather than ominous. I rose, went up to my window and opened the curtains. Behind the curtain the window felt cold, empty, and perhaps even jealous: as if it wanted to suck in the whole room, bed, blankets, pillows and all, and throw it outside. The thick woolen curtains felt rough and heavy, but not unfriendly — like a gruff bear posted as a sentinel to guard my room against the cold.

I touched the window: it was damp with frigid dew. The glass felt weak and inept at its job of separating the inside from the outside. I praised the wool of the curtains, but felt disappointed in glass as a substance, amusing myself all the while at the frivolity of such indignation. I felt my mind waver about glass. As a man of science I had nothing but scorn for the incompetence hiding behind its hardness. It had one task, that of providing separation, but every night it abandoned its duty and betrayed its makers. I could not repress the thought that somehow glass was a substance from purgatory: spiteful, duplicitous, unreliable, and jealous, waiting all night to take revenge on the warm and throw it to the cold. After all, how else could glass be hiding something?

I left my room and walked down to the refectory. My steps seemed awkwardly noisy on the creaky wooden floor. I imagined the dead trees under my feet taking revenge on the living faithful by exposing their silence as a fraud, every morning. Perhaps I was surrounded by vindictive and jealous substances, and this abbey was full of metaphysical hazards?

Further down I sounded blunt and clumsy in the reverberant stone staircase, as if I was plodding with yarn clogs on the surface of a giant drum. The further down I walked, the more the stairs turned drafty, chilly, and resonant. Finally I reached
the refectory’s door. I lifted the cold, smooth, round handle, and at once it was warm and still. The room smelled of oatmeal. The occasional ring of spoons against cups — in fact just a muffled and truncated tinkle — revealed the room’s thick rugs and wall drapes.

The abbot met me after breakfast. I foolishly presumed to open the conversation with shallow prattle about my gratitude to the rough wool of the curtain and my frivolous disappointment with glass for its metaphysical failings — forgetting perhaps that I was not at a Parisian salon amusing friends with witty chatter, but in a mountaintop abbey with a man of religion.

I was quite taken aback when the abbot indicated, without irony, that this was in fact what he intended to discuss that morning: the metaphysics of wool and glass. Hugh of Saint Victor, the abbot declared without any introduction, names two activities in which man can approach resemblance to God: the contemplation of truth, and the exercise of virtue.

I confess it took me a while to accept that the abbot had just said something specific with words that were intended to have a meaning. I was still in oatmeal, body and soul. Perhaps I expected everything in the morning to have the consistency of oatmeal, even philosophical arguments. Perhaps I had just contemplated the truth of my breakfast and exercised the virtue of finishing every last spoonful of it, and that was how far I could think before the gears of my mind could spin further. I listened on in curious and largely respectful silence.

Saint Bonaventure, the abbot continued, follows the division of human activities laid out by Hugh of Saint Victor, and assigns to each one a degree to which they reflect the light of God. In that division, believe it or not, the preparation of wool appears on the same theological level as the art of theater, both of which being called “mechanical arts.”

Allow me, at this point, to anticipate your sarcasm: you quipped in an earlier letter that abbeys nowadays were mostly known
for making goat cheese and liquor. And indeed I can hear you joke now that if their intellectual pursuits also involve discussing optics under the angle of theology, and using texts hundreds of years old without concern for the light that modern science has recently shed on the field — so to speak — then perhaps goat cheese and liquor would be more worthwhile pursuits.

Before you entertain this thought and, God forbid, revoke your kind indulgence for my recounting of this curious story, I should say that the abbot had more in mind. Having explained why he cared about the optics of wool — if I may luxuriate for an instant in the pulp of such an eye-crossing shortcut — you will soon see why he cared about glass and theater as well.

But now I think I have said either far too much or not enough. I fear I have unduly taken advantage of your time and your curiosity by troubling you with such stale and fantastical blather, so I will leave the story here and let you return to your affairs.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT
Sixth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope you are well and that Hélène’s recovery is proceeding apace. The story you tell is indeed extravagant — and more so by the page if I may say so — but you tell it so well that I am beginning to relish the journey more than the prospect of arriving. Half of me ardently wishes to know where your story is going, but I think the other half might secretly hope it goes nowhere.

You now have me musing that we men of science profess to seek truth, and that — pardon me for stating the obvious — we might in fact largely do so in the genuine hope of finding it. But your story makes me search my heart: I wonder if we quietly harbor a certain scorn for wayfarers and storytellers, those for whom truth is a direction more than a destination.

For indeed I am now doubting whether your story will lead me to any kind of truth, or whether I should experience it as a promenade. Part of me wants to be led to truth. But if I find truth, what will I do with it? Perhaps nothing special in fact. Maybe truth only beacons brightly because it is so hard to reach, but it remains a direction rather than a destination. I suppose the same could be said of the search for wealth, since wealth is also quite hard to reach. And for that matter, it seems that anything that is hard to reach could make for a fine quest.

Now I wonder if it is the quest for truth we cherish, rather than truth itself. If so, then our quest for truth is nothing more than a promenade, a wandering for leisure, strewn with beautiful and interesting thoughts like flowers in a planted alley. Truth perhaps serves merely as a sort of sunset, pointing the curious wanderer west and telling him which country to visit next. But the sunset itself is a direction, not a destination. The curious traveler leaves sketches of his visits to beautiful and interesting countries, but he does not actually visit the sunset. I wonder if this is in fact what we do as scientists.
In the end it may matter little for the value of these sketches whether the traveler has gone east or west. We read them and find them inspiring, even if they speak of countries that do not exist, and follow imaginary sunsets in worlds with no sun.

And so perhaps similarly we men of science might leave sketches of the beautiful and interesting thoughts we have visited on our way to truth, even if we wander in worlds with no truth. Maybe the accounts of our wandering thoughts are just fit to be called poetry?

But see how I digress when you throw me into the thick of this strange new tragedy where an abbot, Hugh of Saint Victor, and Saint Bonaventure meet on a mountaintop to find something of philosophical value over oatmeal. The plot is frankly not much more absurd and ludicrous than some of the more fashionable tragedies I’ve seen this season — and perhaps you should really write that play and see if it takes the Parisian stage by storm.

But you still have not explained what the abbot was looking for, and also what you have to do with any of this. There is nothing so strange about abbots busying themselves with fatuous speculations around the thoughts of old authors — that is, in a sense, their profession. But I have yet to understand what value the abbot was hoping to find in the contribution of a modern man of science like yourself to these matters.

In the hope that you will now satisfy the curiosity you have so skillfully kindled, I remain

Your faithful friend and servant,

PIERRE
Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. I had not known you to have such a fondness for the art of promenading, but come to think of it, that is perhaps what theater does for us as well.

Somehow when we have had a fine roast and ale aplenty, and we step into the theater at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in pleasant company, modern science wafts away for the evening. The grease of a good duck glows from our bowels up into the rosy sheen of our contented cheeks and the glimmer of our eyes. For an instant we are a beaming microcosm of our nocturnal theatrical macrocosm, its own incandescent grease also shining contentedly from sconces and chandeliers onto the luster of satins and farthingales. The distinction between mental and physical substance dissolves rapidly in ale and duck fat. For a few hours we would have none of it, and would toast Nicholas de Cusa for bringing the whole universe into our bodies if he was still alive and walked by our table.

And speaking of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, you may recall that brilliant but somewhat eccentric actor Valleran Le Conte — he sadly seems to have fallen out of favor with the public — on stage in one of those curiously compelling plays that Alexandre Hardy once gave there: the story was from Plutarch, and in a sense was just as much fatuous speculation around the thoughts of old authors, to use your own words, as the abbot’s musings on Saint Bonaventure’s theory of theater as a “mechanical art.”

But somehow we do not find Hardy to be fatuous speculation because we expect theater to be false, whereas we expect science to be true. So we delight in idle speculation if it is called theater, but resent it if it calls itself science. Yet in both cases it is perhaps indeed the promenade we enjoy: the effort of going somewhere, wherever it may be, and perhaps also the skill expended on the process.
In theater this is obvious because we enjoy watching plays whose end we already know, and even with the knowledge that the characters are fictitious and there is nothing real at stake in their frenzy. If that were true for science we would enjoy reading old arguments whose conclusion we already know, even with the knowledge that the reasoning is spurious, the conclusion is false, and there is nothing real at stake in the intellectual commotion. And I was going to conclude that we do not—but I wonder: perhaps we do. And perhaps that is true even with new arguments, and perhaps even with our own? We might also occasionally find something true in science, but maybe that is just an added cause for satisfaction in something that is already pleasant regardless.

Now I wonder if theater is just the same but in different proportions. We expect theater to be false, but if we occasionally find it to be saying something true, then it is like finding the clove of garlic in the roast: there is a certain satisfaction in finding it, but we will not swallow it, nor do we wish for more. Yet when we find science to be untrue, then it turns into last week’s roast: we may agree that it was good at the time, but we will have none of it today. And yet last week’s roast and today’s roast are the same thing, and we still praise the cook’s talent for something we would not eat today.

In any case, here I am maundering again and writing you an impromptu neoplatonic treatise on the philosophy of garlic instead of answer your questions and telling the story I had promised you.

To be fair, it was not wholly without purpose that I brought up Nicholas de Cusa, for the abbot has a fascination for his writings. I know that is unlikely to endear him to you—or to me in fact—or indeed to any of the serious scholars of our generation who have devoted their lives to prying science out of the former wretchedness of mystical darkness, and to expounding instead
the clarity of the distinction between mind and matter as the foundation of all possible knowledge.

But recall that we are now in a story set in a mountaintop abbey in the snow, with a blind abbot — did I mention he was blind? — debating questions of theater as a mechanical art with Hugh of Saint Victor and Bonaventure. So if you have enjoyed the journey so far, not for any truth it has purported to uncover, but for the entertainment of the journey itself — just as you enjoy a good play about an ancient crisis — then you might as well embrace Nicholas de Cusa as a character in this strange play and invite him to the table to share in the duck grease and see where it drips this time. It is in that spirit that I will now tell you why the abbot cared so much about him, if you would still like to know.

Nicholas de Cusa, the abbot points out, devoted an entire treatise to the beryl stone: until recently beryl was used to make eyeglasses — until, that is, the craft of making fine enough glass was perfected. In order to make eyeglasses, the beryl had to be properly cut into a lens that is equally convex and concave, allowing one to see things that were previously invisible.

To you and me — and anyone else in this age who can distinguish science from the artisanship of goat cheese and liquor — this is an obvious matter of optics. And more generally this is a question about the behavior of a physical substance, in which we see nothing else than exactly what I just said: the behavior of a physical substance.

But not to Nicholas de Cusa, and also not the abbot, because the former lives in a different century from ours, and the latter lives on a snow-covered mountaintop shrouded in blindness where metaphysics has the consistency of oatmeal. And so if I understand correctly what the abbot said about Nicholas de Cusa, this optical property of beryl is not just a matter of optics, but also a metaphor — or more accurately an allegory. Nicholas de Cusa imagines a sort of “beryl of the mind,” which, if properly crafted, makes discernible what was previous unintelligible to the intellect. And what was previously unknowable, but finally
becomes intelligible through this mystical beryl, is no less than the nature of God.

The question for the abbot, of course, is what such a “beryl of the mind” is, where it can be found, and how it would have such optical properties not for the eye, but for the mind.

I believe you now understand why questions of the substance of wool and glass are not a matter of breakfast chatter for the abbot, but issues of metaphysical and, ultimately, theological importance. But I imagine you are still wondering why these issues should concern me: what light I could possibly have to shed on these arcane questions of the substance of wool and glass, especially as uniquely phrased as they are by Abbot Foulquières?

I was hoping the answer would have been in warm breakfast oatmeal, but it was in beryl: the abbot was looking for a synthesis, a sort of philosopher’s stone in effect — a miraculous marriage of Nicholas de Cusa’s allegorical ideas about optics and Hugh of Saint Victor’s classification of human activities.

This is the marriage proposal: on the one hand, Nicholas of Cusa describes a “beryl of the mind” that will reveal the nature of God. On the other hand, Hugh of Saint Victor describes a “contemplation of truth and the exercise of virtue” that will let us resemble God. The abbot wanted to find these two things together, in one place, or rather I should say in one practice, one activity: an activity that contemplates truth and exercises virtue, and turns out to be the “beryl of the mind.”

And where do you imagine the abbot looked for that mystical synthesis? In an unexpected corner of Bonaventure’s theory of light: theater. Yes, my dear friend: I had traveled through snow to a mountaintop abbey to debate with a blind man over oatmeal whether theater can reveal the nature of God and bring us closer to our Creator.

At least now you understand why the abbot was keen on my expertise — if I can use such a word for the countless evenings I have spent overdressed, daydreaming, or cackling in the theaters of the capital. Hugh of Saint Victor and Bonaventure and Nicholas de Cusa would not tell him anything about those idle ale-filled evenings watching hot grease drip from sconces onto
some far-fetched tragedy at the Hôtel de Bourgogne: he needed me, of all people, to contribute that keystone to his mystical edi-
ifice.

But surely I have now exhausted your goodwill — I have also reached a reasonable closing point in my tale. So I will leave it at that and not bother you further with the nonsensical drivel I have been imposing upon you under the pretense of a good story.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT
Dear Benoît,

I hope you are well and that Hélène’s recovery is proceeding apace. Truth be told, I am troubled by your last letter: I am a man of science, and usually my doubts are of such nature that I am secure in them. But doubt requires method, and method requires certainty that some things can be doubted because they are being investigated, while others cannot be doubted because they are the tool of the investigation or even the reason for it. But all of that is beginning to dissolve in snow, duck fat, ale, goat cheese, and liquor.

The abbot, you see, makes a fine point after all. He is undoubtedly a learned and keen man of religion, and there is insight and discernment in what he says about these illustrious authors.

He is, in a sense, trained to consider these matters along lines of thought that we modern men of science would perhaps no longer deem part of our intellectual arsenal. His work as the abbot of Luzirac gives him a different perspective than ours on Hugh of Saint Victor, Bonaventure, and even Nicholas de Cusa. For, assuredly, you and I still read and respect these authors as intellectual monuments of the generations who have preceded us in faith and science. But it has become harder for us to find spiritual light in them — especially for those among us who, thanks to the recovery of true religion in the past century, have learned to find that inspiration solely in Scripture under the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to distinguish religion from philosophy.

Nicholas de Cusa is perhaps the hardest one of all for us to consider because he is closer to us: so much of our generation’s work has focused on overcoming the neoplatonic nonsense of microcosm and macrocosm, and replacing that folksy allegorical thinking of yore with a scientific distinction between mind and matter.
But I will grant that with some effort we could still appreciate that obsolete philosophy as poetry, and perhaps in fact I will grant more than that: I am willing to concede that in matters of light we may not always be just discussing optics, but that perhaps there is a spiritual matter at hand that can only properly approached metaphorically and through poetic discourse because we lack the ability to investigate it with other methods.

The difference remains that our generation is able to appreciate a metaphor for something distinct from reality — even if in spiritual matters we may come no closer to that reality than the metaphor in question — whereas Nicholas de Cusa’s generation continues to frustrate us for its inability to distinguish metaphor from reality, as if it possessed the ability to walk the straight path of logical argument but somehow always took an unexpected side step and confused inquiry with choreography.

Yet if the generations that have preceded us in scholarship thought it fruitful to dance their way to spiritual cognizance, perhaps we modern men of science would do well to read their contribution as poetry, and to see what light illuminates it as an art — to use Bonaventure’s words. Perhaps we ought to consider whether divine light shines more on the act of making something — on the poetry in the Greek sense — than on the product of that labor, be it a dance or a roast or a piece of scientific reasoning.

And so perhaps Bonaventure makes a valid point about divine light shining on the mechanical arts if we consider that the illumination occurs by virtue of the designer’s work, and not because of a physical property of the finished object made by him. We might read Bonaventure again and start wondering if he sees process, rather than completion, as luminous.

Or to use Nicholas de Cusa’s words, maybe the “beryl of the mind” brings clarity because it is so hard to carve, and not because we can look through it. Perhaps it is our promenade in the direction of truth that is the “beryl of the mind” because truth remains far away and the path is strewn with obstacles, and it is our toil and not our skill or our result that has any value in the world of spiritual optics — if you can call it that.
But if that is so, then what is our role as men of science? Does it matter that what we seek is truth, or are we like poets, who give something of value to the world by virtue of putting toil and skill into their design, and not because that design points to the truth or to anything else in particular? Or is it toil alone, and not even skill, that reflects light?

In any case, I was going to give you my judgment on the play I saw last night, but I now have no memory of it anymore and instead my head is filled with light, snow, goat cheese, and liquor. I might just stop attending plays altogether and look forward instead to an extravagant theatrical setting of your own story. Really — I jest, but not entirely: you ought to make it into a play.

Your friend and servant,

PIERRE
Ninth Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dedication to the esteemed Pierre, scientist

My lord,

The lowly play I humbly present to you has perhaps no other merit than that of having occupied me a while in the desert of the countryside, and if it has the additional merit of entertaining you, surely that quality comes from the lack of skill with which it was made, inspired as it by a shadow of the memory of a shadow, not of the best plays of our age, but of whatever froth the worst ones have left strewn on the sand of my mind after evaporating.

Our God is a generous one and His gifts upon us are many. To you, my lord, he has given, I believe, the gift of discernment, and if any light shines forth from the clumsy work of my graceless hands, it is surely because you have faithfully accepted the gift that lets you see His light reflected in the toil of others. My virtue is feeble and unworthy of such a gift, but if toil in darkness is my lot, I rejoice at least that it is my labor and not my skill that is worthy of gracing others with a reflection of His light.

My lord,
Your very humble and very obedient servant,
Benoît

A PLAY

THE CHARACTERS

BENOÎT, a man of science and frequent theatergoer, visiting from Paris.
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, an old blind man, head of the abbey of Luzirac.
HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, a twelfth-century monk, philosopher, and theologian.
SAINT BONAVENTURE, a thirteenth-century monk, philosopher, and theologian.
NICHOLAS DE CUSA, a fifteenth-century philosopher, and theologian.

The scene is in Luzirac, a stone abbey on a remote mountaintop.

ACT I

SCENE I

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, NICHOLAS DE CUSA

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, holding a shiny rock.

Upon this trinity philosophers have pondered Anaxagoras and before him Hermotimus And all who read Plato have wondered what

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, kicking him.

What?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

What?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

Trinity?
NICHOLAS DE CUSA

What trinity?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

A rock?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

The beryl: a shiny stone, white and transparent,
To which both concave and convex form can be given,
And through which what was previously invisible can be seen.

SCENE II

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, seated in a refectory
over warm oatmeal.

BENOÎT

This oatmeal is a small miracle, my dear abbot.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Everything is a small miracle.

BENOÎT

Surely, but this warm bowl in my hands
The tinkle of the spoon against it
And my bowel swaddled in sweetness.
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Like the newborn Christ in the hands of Mary.

BENOÎT

Your gift for images is also a miracle, my dear abbot.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

All the events around us are but a series of miracles, Whether they move the sun or a spoon.

BENOÎT

I suppose the miracle of Creation Has set the machine of the world in motion And in these noble halls you men of religion Study the original miracle While we men of science study the machine And understand its gears Whether they move the sun or a spoon.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

I do not see it this way. I see only miracles and no machine. And I do not know how to measure the size of a miracle And whether it is a greater miracle That God moves the celestial bodies across the sky Or that while doing so he also remembers To make every spoon in the universe tinkle.

BENOÎT

What is then this machine that we men of science study? Does it not have principles and causes and effects? Surely there is something for us to explain and discover
Lest men of my ilk be called poets,  
Seeing fanciful links where there are none,  
And doing no other good than wording them into pleasantries.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Perhaps they are pleasantries?

SCENE III

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, BONAVENTURE

BENOÎT

If events are just a series of miracles,  
What need do we have of causality?  
Is causality dead, my dear abbot?  
Is the appearance of causation a mere fiction?

BONAVENTURE

If I may interject,  
I believe I have written at length on the matter.

BENOÎT

You tell us.

BONAVENTURE

Avicenna believes in such a theory of causation,  
You could call it occasionalism:  
It views all events as unrelated miracles  
Effected by God at all instants  
With no causation between them.
NICE

BENOÎT

And did you support such a view?

BONAVENTURE

I did not, because Augustine points to a better one.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

But as a literary theory?

BONAVENTURE

As a literary theory? Is that what we are talking about?

BENOÎT

Is that, my dear abbot, what we are indeed talking about?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Were you not, just now, concerned about being a poet?

BENOÎT

I was concerned about the existence  
Of cause and effect in the universe.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Were you actually concerned about the existence  
Of cause and effect in the universe?

BENOÎT

I was.
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Concerned in what sense? About safeguarding it?

BENOÎT

About discovering it. About describing it.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Then is your concern about the universe? Or about the work you do When you write about it for others to read?

BONAVENTURE, *interjecting gently.*

I am, of course, an ordained minister And available to take confession if one of you requires it.

BENOÎT

Then I suppose I can openly confess that my concern Is about discovering and describing causality in the universe And writing about it for others to read And thus my concern is whether that work is science, As I believe Or poetry, as the abbot believes.

BONAVENTURE

Then, if I may, this is not Avicenna's concern And I have not written about it For his concern was the metaphysics of the universe And not the place of scientific writing in literary theory.
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Then if you will, I would like to speak about the Decameron.

BONAVENTURE

In that case, on metaphysical grounds, I must excuse myself from the discussion because the matter is after my time.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Unless you can confess to being a character in a play and secure a special dispensation from the author.

BONAVENTURE

I had not considered the matter under that angle.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

The author is right here.

BENOÎT

With all due reverence, I will not grant such dispensation for the moment, and while I admire your courage, Bonaventure, for confessing to being a character, I kindly request that you withdraw as we discuss the Decameron.

Bonaventure withdraws.
SCENE IV

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, seated in a quiet secluded room.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

If I were to convince you that the Decameron is a fiction, Would that remove all causality from it?

BENOÎT

No, but I am already convinced the Decameron is a fiction. Because it is, indeed, a fiction. We know the author.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

It is indeed a fiction. And does that eliminate the appearance That the various events in the story Are linked by sequence and causality?

BENOÎT

No, that appearance is plain for all to see, my dear abbot. It is created by Boccaccio’s genius and skill, and nothing else. Not by anything intrinsic to the events recounted. For indeed they are not events: They are figments of the author’s mind. Through his skill they are made to look like events, Capable causing and being caused, And of appearing in sequence with other events.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

But in reality?
In reality they are not events
And there is no causality in the Decameron,
Or in any other work of fiction.
I suppose that is the conclusion you were driving at?

No. And I disagree.
If there were no causality in the Decameron
It would be quite tedious to read.
But instead it is very pleasant.

Then I am at a loss.

There is causality in the Decameron,
But it is not a feature of the events.
Causality is not an object in the universe of the Decameron:
It is only a device at the author’s disposal.
With that device he puts a certain order
In the universe he has made
So that, for example, there appears to be events
And causation between them.
But that device is not an object in that universe.
We could call it a category of that universe:
It allows us to order the objects in it.

Could it not have appeared as an object in that universe?
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

It could have, but it does not.
Michelangelo does not paint paintbrushes, does he?
He could have, but he does not.
Devices remain hidden outside the finished work.

BENOÎT

And so with miracles?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

And so Boccaccio has a little machine
To manufacture small miracles at will
Within the universe of the *Decameron*.
It is called causality
And only the author is allowed to use it.

BENOÎT

Indeed, my dear abbot,
Now I see that every event in the *Decameron*
Is a miracle sprung out of Boccaccio’s genius and skill,
And whose causal relationship to other events in the work
Is pure fiction.
But now, do you say so of the real world as well?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.

BENOÎT

That the events in it are pure fiction?
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.

BENOÎT

That

The appearance of causation between those events
Is also pure fiction?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.
Causality is a device we employ to put order in our universe.
But it is just that: a device. It is a fiction.
As you said: we know the author.

_They stand up and walk away._

SCENE V

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES,

* pacing around the cloister quadrangle at night *

NICHOLAS DE CUSA,

* walking silently in front of them, lighting the way with a torch *

BENOÎT

My dear abbot, what about the events we live?
What about this conversation?
And this walk around the cloister of your abbey?
Are they also fictions?
What about Nicholas de Cusa holding a torch before us
And lighting our way?
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

We are but small creatures, are we not?
We cannot create events out of the power of our minds.
Only our author can.
But we can create devices out of the power of our minds
In order to organize God’s creation.
Time, causality: these are our human fictions,
Our most refined creations.
With those devices, we can make sense
Out of a senseless shower of miracles.

BENOÎT

I see, my dear abbot, that this is the privilege
Of the human race.
To frogs and insects there is nothing more
Than a shower of miracles.
There is no order, no sense,
And no beauty perhaps.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Indeed, this is also why our correspondence started
With the question of the soul of plants and animals.
This is what we were driving at.

BENOÎT

I see it now.
But is our world not infinitely more complex
Than the universe of the Decameron?
How can we call it a fiction,
When there is such a perfect order
In the pattern of the planets and the stars?
In plants and animals, in motion and matter?
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

God is an author of infinitely more genius and skill
Than Boccaccio.

Nicholas de Cusa pauses for a moment. The others pause behind
him. He starts walking again. The others resume walking, a few
steps behind him.

BENOÎT

And otherwise our world is nothing
But a very big Decameron, is it not?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

There is a danger in how seductive that statement sounds
Because it is false.

BENOÎT

Then tell me, my dear abbot, what is the difference?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

The difference is where the devices reside.
In the Decameron,
The devices that put some order in the universe
Are not a part of the work itself.
They reside with the author, outside the work.
The participants in the Decameron have no power
To organize their own world.
They cannot order it according to cause and sequence:
We do that for them, and it is imposed upon them.
They only have the power
To perform the acts that have been assigned to them
And to act out their part.
BENOÎT

But in our world?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

In our world, things are different.

_He pauses. Then continues._

We could call the real world a universe whose participants
Have the power to create devices to organize it.
Only God has the power to make events.
But we have the power to see causality and sequence into them.
We also have the power to refrain from using those devices.
Events are fictions made by our author.
But categories are fictions made by us, for ourselves
To organize our universe

_(Looking at the audience and smirking)_

— Though only if it suits our fancy.

*Nicholas de Cusa walks off the stage with the torch, leaving the other two in the dark. They sit on a bench.*

BENOÎT

Forgive me, my dear abbot, if this is an academic question,
But how it this a matter
Of literary theory and not of metaphysics?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Consider the *Decameron*
And the smaller stories told inside it by its participants:
You can imagine endless lower levels of fiction
Of stories within stories.
Boccaccio creates a world
And creates its participants as well,
And then in turn those participants
Create their own embedded worlds of fiction,
And so on.
But the power of authorship remains with the author
No matter how many embedded fictional worlds
His characters imagine.

BENOÎT

And with our own universe?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Perhaps it is more difficult
To envision worlds of inverse proportions:
Bigger worlds, in which ours is contained as a fiction,
Worlds we can explain and order
Because the power to organize and invent metaphysical devices
Resides with us,
But of which we are still participants,
Created by authors who live in higher levels of fiction.
And so on, as far up as your mind can stretch.

BENOÎT

That is harder to imagine, but not impossible.
It would be hard to find evidence for it.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Just a few pages ago
You banned Bonaventure from this discussion,
Is that not evidence enough?
The fact that you and I are characters in a fiction
Is not a metaphor,
But an objective fact: you wrote this play.

BENOÎT

I suppose I would be contesting my own authorship
If I disagreed.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

So this is the inverse of the Decameron.
It is inverse fiction — fiction in the passive voice.
We are being imagined.
There is no limit to how many higher universes
We can imagine, containing ours.
And we can spend a lifetime imagining them,
And ourselves being imagined
As characters in a fiction, even outside this play.
Ultimately this is indeed a matter of literary theory.

BENOÎT

As a man of science
Am I then only a poet?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Being a poet is no small thing.
Perhaps science is the branch of poetry
That organizes the fiction that contains us.
Perhaps it tries to put some order
In a work of fiction in which we are the characters.
But it does so with devices that we created ourselves
And that firmly reside with us, not above or below us.
The abbot stands up, puts his hand on his hip and looks up.

And perhaps even theology is nothing more
Than a weak attempt
To reach for those upper fictional universes
Of which we can barely conceive:
Those worlds where our world is a fiction of a fiction,
A story within a story within a story and so on,
Yet one where on a remote level — ours — the characters
Are endowed
With the power to order universes, to create devices.

They leave, the wind is heard howling.

End of ACT I
Well my dear Pierre, here is at least one act of the play you egged
me on to write. I doubt it would gain the favors of the Parisian
public or be much esteemed by playwrights and poets. I imagine
Malherbe and Montchrestien would find it wretched — as they
generally do anything written by others than themselves.

Perhaps Alexandre Hardy would find some merit in it: he is,
after all, no stranger to irregularity, and perhaps I ought to be
as unconcerned as he is about whether the play is a tragedy or a
comedy, since I do not know the answer either.

But see to what nonsense I am once more reduced: here I am,
discussing the merits of my skill as a poet after staging myself
in fear of being called one. I think I have gone far enough with
this trifle and abused your time and indulgence. If you wish to
cure me of my doubts, why not endeavor to write the second act
yourself, and see if you can either do better, or at least join me in
the indignity of this claptrap.

Your loyal friend and servant,

BENOÎT
Tenth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

It is no small feat of alchemy you have accomplished, proving, as you did, that metaphysics dissolves in ale and duck fat. And though you may shudder at leaving such posterity, history might just remember you for this groundbreaking result. As a fellow man of science, I have done what is my duty and responsibility to the cause of knowledge: I have replicated your experiment, using the very same substances, and you will be delighted to know that I have obtained the same result. To prove it, I submit to you Act II of what is undoubtedly soon to be the most tedious and unpopular play on the Parisian stage in a generation, famous as it will soon become for its sideways neoplatonic choreography and its frivolous lighting.

ACT II

SCENE I

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, pacing alone, agitated.

Could God not have created those devices for us? Are they ours? Are they just our own works of poetry?

(sits on the edge of a chair)

God does not need categories for himself. Why would he make them? For us?

(stands up and begins pacing again)
No, metaphysics is just
Carpentry for the weak and the unfaithful.
We only need it because we are lowly.
We would otherwise be overwhelmed
By God’s endless shower of miracles.
We need metaphysical devices
Like small children need the Bible to be told to them
In a dozen simple sentences.
They could not comprehend the raw bulk of it,
But they can grasp a few highlights
If it is properly organized for them.

(moves to the front of the stage, looks up, addresses the audience)

We need those devices
Like we need the beryl to make eyeglasses:
To power and augment our weak vision
So that we can explore our universe methodically.
But what good is such a device to God?
He does not need to make sense out of the universe
Around him.
God does not need the beryl. He does not need eyeglasses.
The universe is not given to him. He made it.
He does not need to explore it
And inventory its contents. So God does not need metaphysics.
But we do! We do!

SCENE II

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, entering the room and interrupting.

Yes we do. And for this we have poets and scientists.
And they make the same thing:
Poetry, which is a mechanical art.

*(the two remain silent for a while, then Hugh of Saint Victor continues)*

I will tell you something:
There are three ways for man to know something.
The first one is observation,
The second one is logical reasoning.
These two we share with animals.
For animals, too, in their own ways, are capable of reasoning.

**NICHOLAS DE CUSA**

How do you find animals capable of reasoning?

**HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR**

When a dog, having been stoned many times,
Avoids the raised hand holding a rock,
Is he not using induction to predict a general law
From a few instances?

**NICHOLAS DE CUSA**

I suppose he is.

**HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR**

And when mice, surveying the kitchen
And pondering two ways to get to the bread
Choose the difficult way around the glue trap
Rather than the easy way into it,
Have they not compared the value of two propositions,
And taking note that one was absurd,
Concluded to the other one to be correct?
NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Surely they have.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

I tell you then, our own skill in reasoning
Differs only in magnitude and power, but not in kind,
From that of animals.
Similarly animals often surpass us in their skill of observation,
And through their superior senses
Come to know things that we cannot know.
But that is again only a difference in magnitude, not in kind.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Then what is the third way for us to know something?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

I say, it is the third way that sets us apart:
What distinguishes man from animal
Is the ability to receive revelation.
In this respect God has favored man beyond all other creatures
For he has given us a way to know something
Beyond what we can observe
And beyond what we can reason:
A little window onto his infinite glory.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

A little window, you say?
And can we make this window bigger?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

We can make it a little bigger by sharpening our faith.
As for those who do not know this third path to knowledge
Either because they have never heard of it
Or because they are leaving the little window unattended
And looking the other way,
They may indeed have fine observation skills,
Like the far-seeing eagle
And keen reasoning power, like the mice defeating the trap.
And through those two skills alone
They may know many things indeed
For which we can respect and love them as creatures of God.
But like the eagle and the mice, they are animals.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Leaving aside the animals, I am interesting in the optics of this.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

They are animals.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

You are entitled to that opinion.

SCENE III

BONAVENTURE, alone in the refectory, eating oatmeal.

Everything good that is given
Every good gift

(pauses, puts his spoon down — the spoon tinkles faintly)

It comes from above: from the God of light.
And that includes theater, does it not?
Hugh of Saint Victor calls it a type of dramatic art, 
Together with music and poetry and dance. 
And I, with him, call it a mechanical art, 
Because it fulfills a need of the body. 

(takes another spoonful of oatmeal)

People must have assumed I meant that it was the product 
Of that mechanical art 
That fulfills a need of the body 
And reflects the light of God 
As if the labor was just a means to that end.
But now that I am a character in a play, 
As I have previously confessed, 
I wonder if I could not take the liberty 
To read myself otherwise.

(stands and begins to pace, still with the spoon in his hand)

Maybe the bodily need is to make that art
Maybe the need is in the making, and not in the result, 
In the process, not in the product.
Maybe what our bodies need is not what the art produces
But the labor of making.
We only exist in Creation through our bodies
The needs of our bodies are our needs
And if God made us in his image, with bodies in his Creation
Perhaps it is because he is a maker
And he made us makers, too
And perhaps that is how we are in God's image:
As makers in the world he made.
As makers we reflect God's light on Creation
Not through what we make, but through the act of making:
That is what our bodies need,
Because they are made in God's image
And that is how the mechanical arts fulfill that need.
(fidgets with the spoon and accidentally drops it on the stone floor — it tinkles)

God made this world as he imagined it
And made the rules for it
And similarly we make poetic worlds as we imagine them
And make the rules for them
Is that not in fact the essence of that conversation
About the Decameron
From which I had to excuse myself?
And is that not what theater is? A poetic world we imagine?
In spiritual matters we do not come close to knowing reality —
We do not come close to knowing God,
For our eyes are dimmed by sin.
It is only through contemplation that we elevate ourselves
Into God’s light, and reflect a little bit of it.
And that contemplation is the act of making,
The labor of poetry,
The mechanical art of theater.
Theater reflects the light of God
Not because of what it shows the audience
But because making theater is an act
That reflects the light of God
For in that act we use our bodies as makers, in God’s image.

SCENE IV

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, to himself, hiding behind a curtain.

I heard everything!

(facing the audience and comically enjoining them to be silent,
leaning forward with his index finger on his mouth)

Sshhhhh!
I heard everything!
The beryl!
Saint Bonaventure is right:
It is making theater that reflects the light of God
And not watching it.
I was right all along: as a blind man I am not deprived
Of the ability to reflect divine light,
And I was right to inquire about theater!
I praise the author for the chance to be in this play
And to make theater as best I can —
At least as a character for now!

SCENE V

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, BONAVENTURE, NICHOLAS DE CUSA,
ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, BENOÎT, holding hands, dancing, and sing-
ing in a circle in the style of the Commedia dell’Arte.

The beryl! The beryl! The beryl of the mind!
We found it at last! It’s theater! It’s theater!
It’s all about making and not about watching
The light’s in the labor
We’re makers and made
Let’s rejoice and dance
And step forward and sideways
As the mind and the body
Partake of the same roast
And their old rivalry
Dissolves in duck fat and ale!
Let’s rejoice and dance
The light’s in the direction
And not in the destination
Tonight scientists are poets
And all sit at the same table
And join hands in the great theater
THE GOTHS & OTHER STORIES

Of the mechanical arts!

Curtain

End of ACT II
Well my dear Benoît, if there was any indignity in Act I, then I surely have now joined you in it. But lest you think I have also joined the ranks of the damned, let me anticipate your skepticism: I can almost hear you wondering aloud how it is that we can sing and dance in joy at the reflection of divine light in labor, while at the same time profess, together with those who have accepted the true religion as it has been restored to us in the past century, that no salvation comes from our work, but only from our faith.

The answer is that the matter at hand is not how to obtain salvation, but how labor behaves optically—so to speak—within the optics of divine light. For indeed you will have noticed this peculiar feature of the knowledge passed down to us by those who preceded us in faith and science, and particularly of the great authors with whom we have just danced and sung: they are not concerned with what we should do, but with what we actually do.

Our world is pragmatic, theirs is static. The question of what we should do is a unique concern of our generation and entails the notion that we have a choice about it, and in a sense that choice is the mark of those who, like us, have embraced the freedom given to them by God’s gift of grace. And that is, I believe, what makes their view of work compatible with ours: they are not concerned with the ethics of labor, but with its optics.

Nothing in the poetic idea of discovering the “beryl of the mind” in theater entails what we should, or should not, do. The only thing we should, or should not, do is place our faith in our Savior and accept his grace, that is the choice we are given. But because this choice involves no labor—and indeed no labor can supplement or diminish it—the question of what happens to our work in the optics of divine light is wholly separate from whether we receive or reject divine grace. In fact you could call this a shortcoming of our theology: we have so much to say about what labor does not do, that we say little about what it does. And perhaps the answer is simple: it reflects divine light because we are made as making bodies.
In any case the chances are slim that either of us will have much success on the Parisian stage with this play. I cannot quite imagine us writing the remaining acts, and I think the fate that awaits us as playwrights is to be forgotten—perhaps for the better, as theological conversations with Parisian audiences do not always go well.

So without further ado I will let you return to your affairs, as we perhaps both ponder what strange comedy has just unfolded under our pens.

Your faithful friend and servant,

PIERRE
Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. My dear husband Benoît is packing our belongings and settling the last few details of our affairs as we prepare to finally leave this estate and return to Paris, so please forgive my temerity if I take up the pen to write on his behalf.

Our time here has been quite tedious, as I believe Benoît has relayed to you. My husband has little affinity for the countryside: the idea of having unlimited space and nobody to conform to, or disagree with, ironically made him fret like a lion in a cage. I perhaps enjoyed the emptiness more than he did, but as you know, my leg was injured so the space was of no use to me: I was chair-bound and carrying in my very body the physical shackles of being tied to a small place in the universe.

But God be praised: I am healed and I can finally walk on my own again. While the two of you were exercising your great minds and leaping through theories and centuries, as men of science do, I tried my best to contemplate the truth of the Resurrection of our Lord by feeling the pain of his Crucifixion dimly reflected in the suffering of my own body. I trained my mind on exercising the virtue of faith in the rightfulness of my suffering. At last I reached a point where I stopped longing for the vanity of an unfettered body, and instead I began to feel grateful for the consciousness of my physical extension in the world, and for my ability to receive grace and reflect a tiny bit of divine light — not despite the limitations of my feeble body, but on the contrary through the awareness of my modest place in the universe.

As for grace, it was easy: I could do nothing to earn it even if I wanted to, and still I basked in the joy that I was worthy of it. I rejoiced in the incapacity of my body in the eyes of men, as it clarified to me the incapacity it had always had in God’s eyes: not that my body was flawed, but rather, that God did not
need anything I could make for him, and that did not affect how much or how little I deserve his grace.

I also found myself accepting the suffering of my flesh as a privilege. Christ had suffered in his flesh to redeem the sins of others, and as I contemplated my own suffering I grasped that the power to redeem others through physical suffering lies solely within the purview of the divine: I had no such power, my suffering could not be part of any transaction with God or with anyone. No matter how much I suffered, I could not redeem myself or anyone else. Pain was merely a privileged insight into the human experience of Christ, designed perhaps to excite our gratitude to God for having created us as bodies.

As for reflecting divine light, it was also easy: I found myself making even more things than before from the immobility of my chair. The more I knitted, embroidered, and sewed in the dim light of my room, the more I felt like my hands were the candle and my work was the light. And if the room was still dim, it was because my labor was only dimly reflective of divine light, but still reflective enough to dispel the darkness and glorify God by making things, reminding myself that he had made me.

I probably do not quite have the aptitude to understand the many subjects that you and my husband, as men of science, debate and weave into the fabric of your writings, and yet sometimes it seems to me that I do almost the same work with my poor hands in the dimness of my room. For by luck I had brought with me a good thread of Persian yarn, a length of even-sided English foulard twill from fine silk, and a length of satin of Bruges. As I embroidered the yarn onto the satin, I was reminded of the lancing suffering of my flesh each time I pierced the fabric with my needle, as if God was embroidering my body with pain and passing a needle through me, and I was merely imitating his gesture. Yet as the embroidered satin became more beautiful in my eyes, I felt myself becoming more beautiful in the eyes of God as he also embroidered my body with a yarn of pain.

Indeed it is ironic that the practice of embroidery should reflect divine light: Persian yarn is made of wool, which is dull
and matte, while satin of Bruges is made of silk, which is shiny. It is strange that beauty should arise from marring, as it were, a shiny substance with a dull one, and that from this taint a more beautiful object should emerge. But in fact it seems to me that it is not the silk itself that shines, but the satin weave, wherein the weft floats over the warp, that causes it to shine. And in fact English foulard, being also made of silk, should shine as much as satin of Bruges if it were the silk itself as a substance that, through a sort of intrinsic nobility, attracted light, or perhaps I should say reflected it. Yet foulard twill is less shiny than satin, and it seems to me that it is the sturdiness of the twill weaving technique that makes it so.

And so it is not the substance itself, be it wool or silk, that has the quality of reflecting light, but the labor that is applied to it, namely whether it is woven as twill or satin. And perhaps as I sit embroidering wool onto silk in a chair in a dark room, in pain and unable to stand, it is not the quality of my person that reflects the light of God, however dimly, but the labor of my hands, because he has made me a making body in his image, and I am the fabric in his hands.

I have sometimes mused whether the fabric in my hands was sentient in some way, and gradually developed a sort of gratitude for its physical extension in the material world each time I pierced it with my needle, and reminded it through the pain of embroidery that it was being made more beautiful in the eyes of its maker. Perhaps there is a gratitude of objects in the small worlds we make, mirroring our gratitude in the world in which we are made?

In any case, while I embroidered, and while you and my husband debated great things, I was healed, and now I can walk on my own. I praise the Lord for that, though sometimes I doubt if there is any causality in matters of healing. I praise and I am healed, I am healed and I praise: it is hard to know if one comes first and the other follows. Perhaps it is fitting that I do not understand much about metaphysics because it seems of no succor
to us in these spiritual matters. Perhaps causality and sequence
are like twill and satin: just two ways to weave the same yarn, so
we can do something with it?

But you must think I am abusing your time and patience, foist-
ing upon you these wives’ tales about the trifles with which we
concern ourselves in the dimness of our rooms, and usurping
my husband’s pen to cogitate indiscreetly on such inconsequen-
tial matters. Let me therefore bring my chatter to a halt.

As the coffers are being loaded onto our coach, and before I
put this pen down and take my place among trunks and trave-
ling vittles, let me at least promise you that you will see my hus-
band again soon as we return to the capital.

With my humble and most respectful salutations,

HÉLÈNE
Epilogue

I am an old man now, and my memory fails me.

I have now published the thoughts that dwelled for years in commentaries upon remarks upon memories of a snowy sojourn in a mountaintop abbey recounted in a pile of faded letters preserved in an old envelope kept inside a box.

I still do not know if Benoît wanted me to ponder them or burn them, read them or bury them, serve as a beacon of truth or a warning post on the path to error. But I do know that I am an old man, and that my memory fails me. Soon, I will be returned to the dust of the earth — as will you, dear reader.

And so as winter presses nearer, and the last leaf prepares to fall from the tree, I have offered these letters to the public for the edification of the curious and the satisfaction of the faithful. Perhaps as the ages pass upon these letters the purpose of their preservation will become manifest.