

Sheila Delany / TELLING HOURS: A CONVENT JOURNAL

PREFATORY NOTE

The following are excerpts—about one-third the total—of a journal I kept during two weeks at a convent near Vancouver. I went there to start work on a book, *The Spiritual Autobiography of an Atheist*, and to recover from a short but intense romance with a man who had been an evangelical proselytizer before breaking with the church.

As a form of fiction, the journal seems to deny everything we usually associate with fiction: plot, character, polish, coherency of statement. Instead it is heterogeneous, random, raw, subjective—apparently. In actuality, though, a journal is as necessarily selective and worked-up a version of things as any other writing. Subjectivity, we know, is a social artifact, far from random or unique; and even historiography (once considered the most objective of genres) reveals its author's mode of selection.

In its entirety, this particular journal is about two things: the process of healing after loss, and the narrator's interrogation of religion as a way of mediating experience. It has in that sense both plot and character; and, to the extent that the narrator's perceptions are generalizable, a view of life. Who is this narrator? A character, confined to this text and therefore (unlike you or me) without a subsequent history. Or a prior history, or a full range of interests. If, in spite of these limitations, the journal attains credibility and interest, it will have justified its story. Anyway, as my friend Paul Kelley reminds me Mikhail Bakhtin has written: "In which utterance is there ever a face—and not a mask?"

From the night before: Monday, July 9.

My hands remember better than my eyes do: how beautifully, how completely he delivered himself into my hands to be touched. They remember hard thighs, the circumference of cock, a neck surprisingly thick with fine soft hair over it.

In spite of this it is hard for me, still, to think well of Jude. I have to remind myself, for instance, that he is the only one in his family to have broken from Christianity and to be able to call himself an atheist. Thinking well of him is harder in the absence of a photo. Without a photo he dissolves into the words in my other journal—more than fifty pages of handwritten words. I would like to say that I will never forget your precious face, the hollows down your cheeks, but how can I keep from forgetting?

The familiarity of my house irritates: I'll be glad to go to Rosemary Heights tomorrow morning early. I am physically restless, spiritually unsettled. I will go to bed tired of reading though it is early, not 11 yet.

I suppose I am talking about forgiving.

To forgive is to remit or cancel a debt owing. To believe that Jude owes me nothing any more. It is to give up a connection. The refusal to forgive remains a bond, if a negative one, where there is no ongoing relation. I don't really feel it yet. I would like to feel the gentle rain of merciful forgiveness but my heart is still hard—not monolithic, but hardened.

I am reading what people have to say about religion—not medieval theologians or gnostic revisionists, but moderns, intellectuals, some of them ex-Marxists. There is a serious malaise: I do not want to be starting out on a path that could conceivably lead to conversion. To write about it I have to open myself to it, as you do to write about anything—and, insofar as my nature is capable, even experience it. Otherwise I'll be starting this project in vain or in bad faith, it won't be really a spiritual autobiography. I am worried about the material taking over, about becoming passive with respect to it, creating a world that I may be tempted to enter in real life. I can't at the moment say with complete assurance, as I always would have been able to say, "It won't happen. Don't worry." Possibly it is like an actor playing a role and becoming the

character; it is a character unlike his normal one, but it picks up fine threads of temperament that have been buried or ignored. I want to remain, as Simone Weil puts it, "submerged in materialism"—but it has never before been a struggle to remain there. I am tested.

There are, of course, a lot of differences between Weil and me. Primarily, she believed in God, I don't. She prayed daily, I never do. She had migraines, a brother, a thorough French education; I have none of these. She felt that her desire for community would cause part of her to become a Nazi if confronted by a Nazi chorus in full song; not me. Her book strikes me as the work of a middle-class spinster, insufficiently rigorous. I am as unwilling to use her as model, as she was to use the gun given her by Loyalists in Spain. Indeed she was more intransigent: she flatly refused!

But suppose that my present condition—a lurking desire for death, pessimistic vision of the aridity of life without a man to love, the injury of being rejected—suppose all this, working in me, produces a motion toward some unreal love, ideal love, the unconditional love that God has for me? The perfect husband, father and lover. Suppose I become willing to suspend the criterion of intellectual consent—or worse, find a way to intellectually consent? Like skeptical fideism, the doctrine of two truths, the truth of reason and the truth of faith. Faith that exists because it is absurd. And this might be especially attractive because I am for the moment denied the opportunity to make an act of faith with a human being as its object (through of course any Catholic would say that a human being is not an appropriate object for an act of faith but, being variable, can only deceive or disappoint).

Surprise! Jude phones from work. It's nearly midnight, end of his shift in the emergency room at Vancouver General Hospital. It always used to seem so comically appropriate to pick him up at midnight under the huge red neon letters that spell EMERGENCY, like a slogan for our meetings. Even slogan for the whole affair, all beginning and end, no middle, a protracted emergency. He offers to deliver, right now, two letters in response to mine. He says that mine are beautiful, moving, full of charity, "transcending hurt and anger." (He hasn't seen the one I mailed today.) He wants to bring his letters over before I go to the

convent. "Drop them in the mail": I explain I want to concentrate on my own stuff while I'm away, will read his letters in two weeks time, and don't guarantee a reply. The last perhaps an unnecessary bit of nastiness, but I am not so far beyond hurt and anger as he thinks: in fact I'm only just getting there. Midnight comes, he makes no effort to end the conversation, so I do it. His voice tells me (as his words do not) that he's not expected this. Rather than put himself on the line, risk saying he wants to see me, he pretends his offer was only for my sake, only out of consideration for my preference as to method of delivery. "Put it in the mail," I repeat. I'm rubbing his nose in it: this is what it means to break off.

Afterward I weep for the first time these two weeks since. Not sobbing but a slow welling of tears, redemptive. A letting go, as of a balloon that drifts away slowly, trailing the string. I realize I will continue to love him for some time, it is not as completely over as I'd thought, it will be more difficult. O these remnants, dregs, tatters and shards of love! Then, also for the first time these two weeks, I feel horny and take care of that, a chaste once.

From Day 1: Tuesday, July 10.

South down 99 to White Rock, a pleasant little seaside town semi-decayed but with thick veneer of new shopping malls and little boutiques, condos a few blocks from the beach, fancier houses further up the shoreline.

The convent is about ten minutes' drive from the beach, straight north on Johnston Avenue in flat, rural Surrey. Curved driveways, spacious grounds well-landscaped and well-kept: lawns, flowerbeds, hedged orchards, the whole surrounded by mixed deciduous and evergreen woods with trails woven through. It is a series of long, low rose-brick buildings connected by a portico. At lunch I am told that the place was formerly a school for girls, a training school for emotionally disturbed girls, with full staff of social workers and psychiatrists. That is what the foundress, Saint Euphrasia, intended the order to do: to care for girls and women in distress. Government funding was cut off in 1978, and since then the facility has operated as a retreat centre for groups and individuals.

Lunch is the main meal of the day, the hot meal: good solid food and three desserts, everything set out buffet style. We gather in a circle around the buffet while everyone crosses herself and says grace, worldly enough not to comment that I don't speak the prayer.

Four nuns are at lunch; they are all about fifty-five or sixty, all grey or white-haired. Last week, in anticipation of the Pope's September visit, the *Vancouver Sun* ran a series of articles about Catholicism in Canada. It said that 47 per cent of the Canadian population are Catholic, but that of all the brothers and sisters in Catholic orders in Canada only 10 per cent are younger than 45. Here the sisters wear a dress-length white habit, long-sleeved but not uniform. Dark-blue coif. They are not cloistered; that is, they can leave the grounds. It used to be, one of them relates, that the doctor came in, the dentist came in; but no more. Sister Joan, brusque and without a coif, appears to run the place more or less; she is assertive and the others defer to her. Sister Martina is girlish and somewhat timid, with sharp features and a tittery laugh. Though her hair is entirely white, her hands are very smooth and her face unwrinkled, so it is hard to tell her age closely. Sister Jeanne is from Quebec originally and still has a strong Québécois accent. She is small and pudgy, with a head too large for her little body. She bustles and talks and explains things. Sister Rosamund, stolid and shy, keeps more or less to herself, her blue eyes like large moist fruit behind the thick lenses of her spectacles.

There are, evidently, more staff than nuns, though only some of them are at table. There is Nora, a dark, plain, pale young woman who sews and does other domestic tasks. There is a pixie-like, plump old lady with oddly vivacious gestures, Frances, who is introduced as "our lightning rod; she is often with the Lord" (i.e., in the chapel)—to which another sister adds, in a murmur, "We need prayer." Maeve, the cook, is middle-aged and Irish, sharp-featured. There are two other guests, Veronica and Grete.

Grete, about the size and shape and age of Frances, is introduced to the latter as "your double." Grete raises an eyebrow in a skeptical European way but is tactfully silent on the question; plainly she considers that her tinted hair and attractive print dress adequately distinguish her from the unworldly other.

Veronica certainly stands out here: a statuesque blonde wearing tight jeans and black cotton sweater with cut-out shoulders. She is almost albino with her whitish-blonde hair and blue eyes, no visible eyebrows to speak of. She sits across from me at lunch and her voice is so whispery-hushed that it isn't until later, when we talk, that I can even detect the strong Scottish accent. She smiles at everything one says, terribly interested and concerned. Nonetheless I suggest a walk after lunch and she agrees, pleased. Waiting for her in the lobby I am aware of someone reciting Hail Marys in the little modern chapel. I love the sound of it, that low, soporific murmur: it always seems to fall in the same cadences and minor tones, no matter the language or the church; and though this is no high-vaulted Gothic cathedral, the voice seems distanced and echoing nonetheless.

We walk out to the road and then down a path to the river, the Nicomekl River silty and rust-colored. Mucky edge, probably sewage muck. There won't be, as I'd hoped there might, a clean sandy spit where I can lie in the sun and read. As we descend the hill from the road two men fishing across the river whistle at us, then yell about their fishing. There isn't even enough of an edge to walk along the river. We feel, at least I do, like accomplices. It isn't hard here to feel like children in a community of adults, ever so slightly resistant to the aged authorities and the system. Veronica: a good Catholic name, though she is not Catholic: *vera ikonika*, true imprint of the Lord's face on a handkerchief. She is breaking up a marriage of nine years to a harsh, moody man who, she says, threw her love back in her face. She realizes now he will never change, even the psychiatrist says so.

At supper the other guest comes into focus: Grete, a woman of seventy, just over cancer surgery. She has come through it well, and recounts in her Austrian accent the endless tale of the operation and recuperation. She was about to embark for Vienna when the news came that she was ill; the tickets had already been bought. I am glad to have talked with Veronica earlier, but I see that this could be more sociable than I want it to be: if I am to work I will have to be generally unavailable except at meals.

In a corner of the dining room there is a large painted wood statue of John Eudes, first founder of the order before St. Euphrasia reorganized it in the nineteenth century. In black hat and roped cassock, he extends the flaming heart of Jesus. Everywhere, of course, there are pictures or statues of Jesus, Mary or saints. In the

lobby a small but splendidly painted statue of Mary, star of the sea, arising from the waves: bare feet, aquamarine robe over white gown, both garments elaborately edged with gold tracery. Finery. Physicality. Clean feet: an achievement in sandal-clad Jerusalem. There is a crucifix in every room. In my room the crucifix is over the desk, and on another wall hangs an undistinguished and sentimentally rendered Mary, haloed, blonde and pretty in a rather 1920s style. There are also, in the conference rooms and hallways, many nature-paintings or reproductions of them: peaceful woods or meadows, surf breaking against rocks with light coming through one translucent swell—the kind of painting that is supposed to show the glory of God in created nature. In the lobby there is a counter full of trinkets and charms and wall-hangings, some with distinctly new-age mottos about the importance of love and friendship. There are also rosaries, tiny crucifixes, sorrowful bleeding heads of Jesus crowned with thorns. The impact of these comes through despite the surrounding schlock. There is a larger crucifix in the dining room, and if I say that contemplating it would take away the appetite, this is not because of physical revulsion merely, but because of the mood of intense sorrow and affliction it creates. It is not, however, hung so as to be easily visible from the tables.

The crucifix that hangs over my desk I remove, take it to the window to study it closely. At the top is the scroll reading INRI—*I*esus *N*azareth *R*ex *I*udorum, Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. I grasp it by the bottom, as if on crusade, or warding off a vampire. An ikon. The feet are not nailed but rest on a small ledge or pedestal; the arms very attenuated, rib cage and hip bones very detailed. To tell the truth I do not have any blasphemous thoughts about it. On the contrary, I hang it on another wall, not wanting it as tutelary spirit to my work, though not minding it for the room itself. Why not for the work? Too overwhelming an image, demanding attention and the subordination of one's own thoughts. Next to that affliction, and the history that flows from it, everything else subsides. I am reminded of a friend in New York who complained that she couldn't work at her desk. When I visited her, I saw that her desk was surrounded with photos of the man who had recently left her and for whom she still grieved. I told her she would not be able to work until she put those pictures away, but she couldn't bear to take them down and asked me to do it for her, in her absence. I never keep photos in a room where I work, nor, in general, representative art at all.

At supper the front buzzer sounds. Sister Martina hurries away to answer, and returns to announce girlishly that there is "a young man" to see me. There is the slightest soft burst of titillation at the table, and a certain slight coyness in her announcement too, that remind me of college, my dormitory at an all-female country campus. The visitor turns out to be not Jude but Gord F., a student of mine ten years ago—in a Bible course, as it happens—who became a good friend and who now practises medicine in White Rock. He's biked over: shorts, muscle shirt, cap. We return to the dining room, and again it is like college: a kind of prestige in being visited, and especially by a vigorously handsome and semi-naked young man—well, not all that young, but early thirties. "Is that your son?" blurts out Sister Jeanne, and I tell Gord he should be flattered to be taken for eighteen. Gord fits in well, gregarious as always. He refuses supper, but accepts strawberries, the dessert: "That's tempting."

"Didn't take much," comments Sister Joan—the only dry or even slightly ironical remark I've heard so far from any of the sisters.

"It never does," I reply equally drily, and there's a quick glance of appreciation from this sharp-minded and sharp-tongued woman. Even though the exact dimensions of my rejoinder are ambiguous, at least it has dimensions, and most of the nuns' conversation is void of dimensions.

After supper I sit with Gord on a lawn. We haven't talked for a long time, years, while he's been away at medical school. Something seems different, his face more vulnerable, his body less so. His body has always seemed like a defense system to me: too developed in shoulders, arms and chest. Now it is even more so, and the thighs correspondingly overdeveloped. He has, in the last few years, become a power weight-lifter, with records in Alberta and able to aspire to international competition. But the effort has given him high blood pressure and burst blood vessels about the eyes and nose, so he has taken up cycling instead and may compete in a Vancouver-Mount Whistler race. It has been a hard year for him with profession, wife, friends and family. In March he tried to kill himself with a huge muscular injection of morphine (to which he

was also at the time addicted). Both parts of this are astonishing. I don't associate addiction or suicide with people of high energy and good common sense. He creates a lot of his own stress, he says, and the eternal busyness is a way of not feeling. Oh Gord, we have a lot of each other's history, haven't we? Continuity is important to you now because you're ten years older than when you were the smartest one in my Bible class at SFU, and because you almost died—important enough so that you can say things you couldn't before. You escort me back into your life, another rite of passage we've performed. I'm invited to your barbecue next week, where I will meet your wife and other friends.

Tonight I am reading about seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography, and though the reading is for my book, it helps me to understand Jude better—as a Calvinist. Where Catholicism locates the devil externally, Calvinism brings it into the human mind, in full possession of it. The conviction of depravity. Unworthiness. It also arrogates punishment to man. No forgiveness: predestination makes it irrelevant. (Is this why Jude is a predestinarian in love, deciding so early and irrevocably that a relationship can't possibly work? Perfection or nothing.) No real way of knowing whether one is saved, neither confession nor absolution. A minimal and elitist sacramentalism: sacraments for the already virtuous, the object conveying only a diminished symbolic presence, not a real presence. Calvin calls the proposition "This is my body" a metonymy: the name of a higher thing given to a lower. He is rigorous here: a sacrament is a sign ("the visible sign of a sacred thing": or "the visible form of an invisible grace"—both Augustine) and a promise. On this basis he takes out five of the seven Catholic sacraments, including marriage, which makes no promise, no more than any other God-instituted activity does, such as agriculture or barbering. Nor does the allegorical reference to God's marriage with the Church make marriage any more a sacrament than a Biblical parable. I agree with Calvin's rationalism here. Yet for a person who wants to be religious, I would think that any religion with strong and available sacraments is healthier than one without, because sacraments affirm sensual reality just as good works affirm social reality. The poor Calvinist has only his poor self as the way to God: truly he is impoverished.

From Day 2: Wednesday, July 11.

Grete, Veronica and I linger for an hour at the table after supper. The nuns congregate promptly at 5:30, eat rapidly and disperse. Their speed could have an ideological cause: to avoid indulging in pleasures of the flesh longer than absolutely necessary. Or an institutional cause: mealtimes always assume inflated importance in an institutional setting, especially a boring one with standard routine: they are eager. One of the nuns goes after every crumb of her cake, mashing it into her fork. It makes me think of Chaucer's Prioress: how unusual she must have been with her super-genteel good manners, wiping her lips daintily before every sip so as to avoid getting grease in the cup. I realize it isn't poor manners that the nuns are quick, just a businesslike attitude, no frills.

The food tends toward starch and vegetable—not easy to keep up my usual high-protein balance. There is a salad or raw vegetable platter at every meal, a substantial cooked meat at noontime dinner (steak, fish, liver, or chicken) and cold-cuts at supper (ham, beef, salami) varied with a home-made soup or vegetable. Tonight it's both: Scotch broth and sweet-sour red cabbage. There are scones and whole-wheat rolls, fresh raspberries, rhubarb-apple pie, custard. Good food.

The nuns' conversation so far ranges from bland to painfully trivial: food, weather, etc. The guests tend to fall into this monotony when the nuns are present: nobody wants to distinguish herself with a determined conversational assault—not even me. Veronica especially listens to the nuns with a series, a repertoire, of exaggerated facial expressions: intense concern, rapt concentration, surprise, distress—she uses these expressions even when it is the tedious history of a woman who converted, and became a nun, and is now eighty, and used to live in such and such a house, and so on.

Question: Do I need Jude in the background to maintain the momentum of my present work? In cutting him off entirely, will there be a complete reversion to rationalism that ends my openness to others' religious life, or makes it easy to dismiss the whole thing once again, even ridicule it in myself? With him about, even in a marginal way, there is a little area of rawness—like the patch of skin abraded with sandpaper where the electrodes go for an electrocardiogram. It is necessary to be rubbed raw a little—for the skin's thickness, the hide's protective surface and the accretions of daily life to be abraded—in order that the heart's motions may be accurately recorded.

A quiet little flurry of excitement in the evening: a deer has appeared in the back and is roaming cautiously about the orchard. (We saw Sister Joan's photos of the deer last night at supper.) Veronica is in raptures; she has very much wanted to see a deer before she left, almost as token epiphany of the meaning of her stay here. There is also a rabbit poised on the walk, and it is like a Walt Disney movie as we cluster at the windows to see.

From Day 3: Thursday, July 12.

After lunch I show Grete and Veronica my room—an excuse to visit together, really, and since they are both leaving later today there is a strong sense of fellowship. It is less than three days that we've known each other, but we know each other intimately, having started out with the reasons for being here. Veronica and Grete have spent a lot more time together than I have with either of them—long walks, watching TV in the lounge, for all I know praying together in the chapel—but there's no sense of exclusion. Veronica is reluctant to re-enter the outside world, which she is intermittently reminded of by traffic buzz from the highway nearby. She shows us a copy of her personal Bible, bound in white leather and gold-embossed, a gift from her husband the exigent and

incurrigible Alexander. She is quite religious as it turns out: raised as a churchgoer, "strayed" in her teenage years but returned to the church. She had serious questions, in fact a crisis of faith, when her mother—a good and gentle soul—died of cancer six years ago at the age of fifty-two: at that point Veronica even said she hated God. But now she does a lot of church work, needs God, needs to believe that her mother is at rest and that she will see her mother again. She needs to believe that this life isn't for nothing. A year ago it got so bad with Alexander that she thought of taking her own life, and of taking their son's as well so as not to leave the boy to Alexander's malign influence. A murderess in her heart, repented. It is incredible she can tell us this. Confession, I suppose, and she seeks forgiveness in the human community. Now her face is stressed, on the verge of tears; she does not want to let herself weep, and she doesn't.

Grete, a Catholic, tells a story about how, on the acreage she had in Langley, there was a stump with an anthill in it, thousands of ants. The bulldozer came and took out the stump, and the house was built. Well, the house was there, and if one ant survived, she (and I love Grete for this "she") would not know how it came there. We are able to see the connection, but the ant is not. And so with us, our knowledge is not enough to understand the reasons and connections. It is a perfect Catholic fable about the workings of Providence and the limits of human consciousness and the need for faith. Chaucer tells a similar one in the little digression about nymphs and fauns in the *Knight's Tale*; and Grete is pleased to learn that she is in a tradition, though the story is her own. Yet it is a story that a Catholic would think of—whereas Veronica, with her Calvinist epistemology, does not have the cosmic view, does not see the natural world as instructive, redemptive or sacramental. Veronica can only wait uneasily for God to reveal what he wants her to do, and hope she is doing the right thing.

Later, exchanging benedictions and farewells I know that despite the intensity we haven't got what it takes to be friends on the outside. It's very specialized in here. We don't exchange addresses or phone numbers, or wishes to see one another again.

So far this retreat has not been any escape from humanity, intensity, horror and loss. Sister Jeanne says that after Kate goes, tomorrow, no other guests are scheduled to arrive, so I will be really alone. And it is only 7 p.m. More could yet happen.

Day 6: Sunday, July 15. At home.

I am edgy here, back home, wish I were at the convent again. Everything is intrusive here. The neighbours' dog sets to barking at 3 a.m., and whining at 9. Then Nick, my older boy, comes up from the basement where his room is: his firm tread from room to room on the first floor. Then he calls me, and comes upstairs to discuss his college applications. Ten o'clock. As I start out to get my *Times* and thence back to White Rock, a phone call. Seth and Jean Cohen, making their way up the coast to Powell River, are now in Portland, will arrive later this evening and stay here. Should I stay the extra day for them? I won't see them again soon, their hospitality when we were in LA, the years-long acquaintance and rarity of the meeting: I'll stay. Of course. Go into town, purchase *Times* and *Voice*, come home, read them. Jamil calls. Later I lie down to sleep, but radio music from next door prevents a nap. In order to write it seems I will need to be away for an extended time. Even as I write this Nick interrupts to ask me to help him find the misplaced first draft of his application essay, comes upstairs to help me look.

Dinner alone at the Himalaya restaurant after swimming, before Seth and Jean are due. This part written on the restaurant's fortunately blank newsprint place-mats. I should always carry paper. In the shower at Kitsilano pool this afternoon an absurd dialogue occurred to me, obsessed as I continue with Jude. Possessed, even, and in need of exorcism. "I'll pray." "To whom?" "To God." "God who?" "The God that answers prayers." I'll pretend I am about four years old (might as well; feel it anyway) and in the same condition of suspended disbelief as the little girl the anthropologist Frobenius tells about, whose matchstick "turned into" a witch. Kids pray to get a bicycle at Christmas, I'll pray for what I want of Jude. He calls it a "mating relationship," and says that in spite of a kind of love, he doesn't want one with me. Even though I believe, intellectually, it would be destructive. Why am I still ambivalent, when the issues are posed so clearly? How can you continue to love someone who is not good for you? I thought I was incapable of that.

Either you do not fully believe he is not good for you, and have hope of some good from him. There were hints of this good: promises, "the visible form of an invisible grace." That he was able to read Jim Cannon's book on American Trotskyism and respond to it so beautifully, understanding it as my tradition. That he felt "like

a tree rooted in earth" when we made love. His relief when I came back after walking out on an argument. His tears when we decided to stay together. That he was able, even with qualifications, to say he loved me.

Or there is in you something that wishes to be abased, to abase and veil itself, bow and worship before a shrine (a dim old stone sanctuary, perhaps in India). Something that wants to operate on the level of instinct or passivity entirely, to give up in a way, quit fighting. But actually I have to keep fighting to stay in any touch with Jude at all: the easiest thing would be to let go and cut him off completely. It would only take a sentence or two, by phone or mail, and I'd be quit of that oppressive weight for the rest of my life. "Oppressed": the image is of him lying on me: the pleasure of oppression—such are the paradoxes for those who know a little Latin.

Or there is a conviction that I am unsinkable.

Why do I want so much to please this person, this goofy-looking, narrow-minded youth? Because of the beautiful, polyvalent man in him. Maybe for some other more sinister reason. In New York there was a big, good-looking, white-haired and treacherous dude with rumored links to the CIA, who linked on the student revolts we all took part in. My old friend Henry described this man as "the handsome fascist pig every nice Jewish girl would like to fuck." Jude could go either way—like Céline, in Trotsky's review: toward real authoritarianism and rigidity (backsliding of a secular kind) or forward toward polyvalence. Is it the future polyvalence that attracts, or the hidden rigidity?

Am I or am I not going to pray? I am already praying all the time: does it matter whom I address? I am like a nun whose vow is to repeat the same prayer every minute of her waking existence, a mantra. There is that first moment of waking—only a few seconds before my conscious mind clicks it into place. The mantra is ritualized, formulaic, boring. It deadens the mind, but rubs it raw at the same time, like the moment Paul Bowles wrote about that everyone undergoes who confronts the Sahara alone: "*la baptême de la solitude*." It forces me to realize how extremely much wanting there still is. I'm left not with a person but a condition: Jude-ness. A principle. It isn't that love entered my heart, but that you did. My interiority is you. A flame glows in me: you—though it's a candle lit to honor the dead.

It is bizarre to think that people have written this way about Jesus, an incorporeal presence. I think you can't really pray for

what you want personally. There are no prayers for that. You can pray in order to attain an attitude or a condition, like forgiveness. I, at any rate, can't pray to something I don't believe in.

Part of me wants to be part of something or someone else, an appendage, cog in the wheel. It is an instinctual social striving—"species consciousness"; or is it that infantile level Jude tapped into that wants to be in the womb again with somebody else making the decisions, doing the work? As in the cloister.

From Day 9: Wednesday, July 18.

John Henry Cardinal Newman: "All had passed in a dream, and he was a stranger where he had hoped to have a home."

At lunch, Maeve, the cook, joins us. She is three years out of Ireland, northern Ireland, and her daughter, at college there, has just won a prize in history. We discuss allergies, and everyone produces an allergy story. Maeve's is that she suffered for months from sinus, then decided to make a novena to St. Martin in order to discover the cause. And as soon as she started the novena, it occurred to her: the new houseplants. So she threw them out and was cured, and remembers St. Martin with periodic offerings: "He's good for diseases and things about the house." "*And mice,*" adds Sister Rosamund.

Tomorrow is my last full day and night here for the week, though it may be possible for me to return for another few days next week again. Interesting. This opens the possibility of Jude visiting me out here to deliver his letters. If he offers to do so. If I agree. If I would like that, though—for him to come to lunch, meet the sisters, see the place. Interesting because it extends our future into another week, unexpectedly. Of course he could simply drop off the letters at my house unannounced, though this would be uncharacteristically risky and spontaneous. Will I ever be able to say, "Like all firm Persuasions it is come to pass?" Yet I doubt even Blake can help me here (and my persuasion is not so firm any longer)—here where I am like Hansel and Gretel walking in the woods, where Blake, and everything I've read, is no more helpful than breadcrumbs cast behind to show the way back. I remember once Henry said that his relationship with L. was sometimes like a fairy tale. I wonder which fairy tale he meant. I always assumed it meant something rich and strange and wonderful, a Russian/Oriental fairy tale. But this is a German one, severe and terrifying (and Jude is of German stock). Yet even a German fairy tale may turn out well for the protagonists.

They may weep bitterly—they *do* weep bitterly, they are treated badly, but they plow on with ingenuity and openness and sometimes a little brutality of their own. What would my strategy be? How would I outwit my enemies? (His past is my enemy.) Win them over, or else use their weakness against them. But one has to be up close and in danger to know what the weakness is; in fact one is usually already entrapped before discerning the weakness. Perseverance and decisiveness. I really am spinning out a fairy tale here. O well: as well live a fairy tale—even a German one—as some tedious contemporary novel.

From Day 10: Thursday, July 19.

It is so easy here to be purely a writer, and let it all happen between me and the page in a kind of continuous orgiastic release. You forget your other roles and live purely in a state of desire. That is, after all, what a convent is for—to devote yourself to desire (theirs for God), to cultivate it. This is why I get along with the nuns so well: because I am doing the same thing here that they are. I think they see in me a purity of intention and an intensity of devotion, an interiority which makes it not difficult for me to feel at ease with them, even like one of them, on a different track but methodologically similar.

Last night I got a steam burn, making a cup of herb tea in the hall lounge at midnight. I kept ice on it for about four hours, and Vitamin E from my capsules, and finally a tea bag, until it stopped hurting. It's surprising how slowly the histological effects of a trauma emerge. First, naked pain with no visible mark: intense burning sensation whenever the ice melted away. After four hours or so, there emerges the slightly raised, pinkish welt that defines the burn area. Another day before discolouration sets in. Now, three days later, the discolouration is fading: no scab, no blister—smooth, with a kind of epicentre a little darker. The discolouration is more like a bruise than a burn, light purple-brown on the inside of my arm where it passed over the steam-kettle spout.

With my feelings too, the worst symptoms were averted by immediate intensive care: lots of talking to friends, lots of writing about it; but gradually the welt and the discolouration set in anyway, there's no avoiding them; and so, though I'm perfectly functional and even frequently happy, there's an underlying melancholy to me right now, that sometimes even deepens into anxiety, a band of it from stomach to throat.

Day 11: Monday, July 23.

Down. I'm back down after the weekend at home. To the point where I barely want to write even this.

At dinner Sister Jeanne regales us with her account of the wedding Saturday at the Ocean View old people's home. She lists the names of the other aged guests: "'Oo helse was there?" From another table, listening to but not quite hearing the recital in all its details, a visiting Father inquires: "Did they get married in a rest room? I mean rest home?" The bride was 90, the groom 84. (This indeed is going with older women!) She has twelve children and is Catholic. The wedding was to have taken place in a local church but couldn't because the groom had been in hospital having his leg amputated, and wasn't well enough. The bride is determined not to use her cane to walk down the aisle: "No way I'm gonna use a cane to walk down that aisle!" is Sister Jeanne's version of it. The bride is given away by her son, and keeps everyone waiting until the organist plays the proper music—the wedding march—so that she can emerge from the wings. Now they will share a room in the rest home.

From Day 12: Tuesday, July 24.

Lunch: discussion of Jews and Judaism with Sisters Rosamund and Jeanne. How did it come up? Don't remember, but in response to some assertion about Jews and family loyalty I relate an anecdote. Halfway through, Sister Rosamund breaks in as the light dawns: "Are you Jewish?" And, to my affirmation, "No wonder you're so smart!" Then she joyfully calls Sister Jeanne over from the buffet: "Did you know Sheila is Jewish?" I find her overtness very touching, and her naive pleasure. Sister Rosamund's experience of Jews has been very good, she says (thank goodness!); she knew quite a lot as foster families for underprivileged girls in Toronto, where the order has a home. Sister Jeanne sits down and begins an encomium on the Jews for their sharp business sense. This stereotype I feel I do have to counter, so we go through the whole thing. But she is stubborn, or else it is such a habit of mind that she can't see it as stereotype at all. It's a fact of life, which one may praise or blame: that Jews have money, are good at business. To blame or resent it would be anti-semitic, so she will praise it; but she can't

actually dispense with it. Oh well. I suppose I offer her an opportunity to implement the program of Vatican II by showing charity to a member of the chosen people, the ancestors of Jesus and Paul, the forerunner of her own faith. Fine. Good enough. Better than a kick in the pants, as my ex-husband would have said. Sister Jeanne goes on to tell me about Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher who became a Christian, and Sister Rosamund lends me a biography of Simone Weil.

I've lost the rawness, the compulsion to notice and write everything. The wound's scarring over. The convent is by now perhaps a little too familiar and cloying, sticky with the memories and anxieties experienced here. It will be good to go to England for the Chaucer conference. I've lost what I think Simone Weil would call a certain "attention"—and a tension. Am I going on the momentum of inertia rather than real speed. Am I slowing down for the curve? For my trip abroad, the shift of gears into academic conference life followed by a new semester? Everything seems less writable now. There's a desire to sleep and to rest.

My burn is still there visually, and probably will be for another week or two, but it doesn't hurt, even when stroked or pressed. I cherish it, I like having it as correlative of the inner condition. It's important to be able to see something heal and go away. I don't know whether I did it to myself on purpose in order to externalize pain—I rarely have accidents of any kind. It was a careless gesture, taking a chance, given the position of the kettle. I knew I could get burned but thought I wouldn't, took a gamble and got burned.

Sister Jeanne brought me a quarter chicken at dinner. Where does she get this food-hoard from? I wonder whether she is being extra-nice to me because of finding out I'm Jewish. I'd better not be hypersensitive: she's been nice all along.

Day 14: Thursday, July 26.

A date in the Cuban revolution. One month plus a day since breaking off with Jude.

Cool today, prepared by last night's thunder, quick rain, lightning display.

I believe I can say, would have to say, I no longer love Jude ("and yet, when all have given him o'er / From death to life thou mightst him yet recover"). I don't even think the Drayton is any longer true, though one hates to close the door so definitively. Soon I will be forgetting him, I will have forgotten. That there was intensity I remember, but to feel it is more difficult every day. Only the writing will be left of his image, and eventually it will be only writing.

Just now I went into the convent chapel for the first time—my last day. Quite a wonderland. Yes, I did dip my finger in the little holy-water font to my right upon entry—actually, I pressed my finger to the soaked sponge in the font. And yes I did, though not immediately, sign myself: wet finger to forehead, left and right shoulder, abdomen. Have always wanted to perform this little rite that I've seen done so often. I didn't dip or kneel.

In place of stained-glass windows (the chapel is windowless) there is a series of small enamels up one wall and down the other, depicting the stations of the cross and events in Christ's life. A beautiful lace-trimmed altarcloth on the altar table. A liturgical book open on a reading stand. Candles burning in large blue or red glass lanterns with wrought pewter covers. Fresh snapdragon and gladiolus on and near the altar—now I see why these tall flowers are cultivated in little plots here and there on the grounds. Odor of scented candle-wax.

And there are relics—*ex ossibus* St. Euphrasia and John Eudes, the founders. Probably each house in the order has a relic. The Euphrasia relic—a tiny roundish chip of bone—is mounted on a plaque beneath a small portrait of the woman; this is framed and mounted on a most elaborate reliquary that stands some two feet tall, an incredible piece of rococo art in wrought metal, cruciform, curved and curlicued, inlaid with enameled tiles, red and green semi-precious stones, the whole topped with an elaborate cross. The relic of John Eudes is in a smaller and much less elaborate hand-held reliquary, like a highly decorated picture-frame.

In a way they were right, the church fathers who chastised classics-loving Christians with the question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Or Alcuin's later version: "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" to his monks who spent their time reading Norse saga. I suspect it was not only the distraction they saw as a threat, but the alternative methodology. Once you begin to admit another criterion for truth than the literal, a way of interpreting the truth of poetry as relative, symbolic, figurative, etc.—you open the way to treat religion the same way: to the Calvinist symbolic presence, for instance, rather than transsubstantiation.

As a habit of mind this makes religion less literal, more literary. It offers a way of accepting religious propositions as exemplary, symbolic, representative, redemptive, possible, etc.—anything but literally true. "Structurally meaningful," "relevant." Is it possible to take Jesus for your saviour that way? Probably. The new Anglican Bishop of Durham proposed just this view of it, to cries of "scandal" and "shame" at his consecration in York Minster. Is Jesus my saviour? No, but I suppose he could be if I wanted him to be. Someone could be so why not him symbolically? People do sacrifice themselves for one another, do save one another. Still, what about one person sacrificing himself for everyone else? A convincing story and a powerful symbol.

Why would one bother to believe it, what would be the need or advantage? An aesthetic thrill? Yes. Feeling of communion with a large number of people? Yes, though a lot of them you wouldn't want to spend time with. A channel for reverence and other similar emotions that you don't have the chance to feel often, in the normal course of things. Still, those criteria can be met in human love: aesthetics, communion, reverence. I think religion would be hollow substitute for human love. It is, however, a lot more readily available, and much more stable. Yet it remains settling for less.

At supper the meal consists of everything I am allergic to. Sister Jeanne, noticing my sparse plate, goes into the kitchen and assembles a special plate for me that I can safely eat: roast chicken, wonderful homemade cookies, fresh blueberries. She thought of me, she says, during the reading in chapel this morning, and from her fractured quotation I recognize the lines: "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem the holy city; shake yourself from the dust, arise, O captive Jerusalem." She would very much like to go to Israel to visit Jerusalem and especially a kibbutz. She is going a little overboard, I

think—though on the other hand one of the major planks of the Vatican II reform is about the necessity to respect the Jews. It must be difficult for someone bred in a more virulent Catholicism, but she is trying to live up to the new line. Nonetheless, “You’re just saying so because you know I’m Jewish,” I josh her. “Oh, she can’t,” Sister Rosamund protests, flushing, “she can’t be two-faced.” She is well aware, then, of what I’ve been thinking, and distressed that I should distrust.

Everyone knows I’m leaving after supper. There is a genuine pang saying these farewells. Frances, pixyish and stout, is last in the dining room, clearing off the buffet. She calls after me, “Wait!” as I go out. “I wish you luck,” she cries happily with opened arms, and as I approach, “I wish you luck in a Jewish way!” What is this? Not, I hope, some patronizing pretense of acceptance. But the story, her story, is that though Frances is German, she grew up among Russian Jews in Odessa, lived in a household of Russian Jews. Why she was there does not come out; in her excitement to tell me her experience of Jews she omits this information and there’s no space to ask. She describes, with her vivacious gestures so familiar to me from my aunts—and now I know why—the strict kosher home, the two sets of plates for milk and meat, the young boy hired to light the stove on Saturday because all work was forbidden on the Sabbath. It occurs to me that perhaps Frances herself was born Jewish, and converted to Catholicism at some point, but she has treated this whole thing as a secret and I don’t wish to ferret out more than she wants to reveal. What the whole story is I don’t know and she is satisfied to repeat, with upraised finger, her benediction, conspiratorial: “I wish you luck in a Jewish way!”

Sister Martina sees me off in the lobby, a little formal. Sister Jeanne hugs me (she comes about up to my chin). Finally Sister Rosamund lumbers out and shyly receives my embrace. She reddens with emotion—a real blush!—her eyes shiny behind the enlarging lenses, and it seems she is moved, as I am, at the mutual acknowledgement of affection. Her reticence, I realize, is the measure of her capacity: it is protective. She is the one I feel closest to, the one who has tried to find out something about me and who

seemed even to take a certain pride in me, almost as a mother would do, in my work and my knowledge. I would like to continue to know her, and say so. This parting is difficult for Sister Rosamund too, I realize. It is wrenching to leave: I am fond of these women. It isn't that we've been close in any real sense, or could be. We're foreigners, and in reality don't want to know one another. Or, more accurately: I know about them now all that I ever would. They are nuns, the white habit says it all: what you see is what you get. The rest of their lives isn't accessible to me—their past (other than institutional) or the range of their emotions or opinions. Their confessor will know this, but not me nor anyone else. I suspect, too, that they wouldn't care to know much more about me than they do right now. Still, they have been the people in this place, the fixed co-ordinates of the venture, and I love them as one loves one's past.

At home the house is quiet and tolerably neat; the boys have cleaned up more or less. There's a list of phone calls and a pile of mail, including a packet of letters from Jude, his responses to mine. Of course I open them at once and read. One of them is apologetic, nearly grovelling. Full of crocodile tears and grandiose rhetoric. Another is sincere and conversational, though distanced. A third (this one in response to my bombshell) is angry. A real war-document from start to finish, full of talk about strategy and traps, assault and defense. Not actually to finish, though: it eases off toward the end and winds up with the intention to resume later. I go upstairs and sit down at my desk for three hours to answer. I will be in England when he gets it, forced into exteriority again. When I come back it will be time to start preparing classes for the new semester. I wonder if this is the last I'll write to him, the last I'll want to. I've thought so before and been wrong.