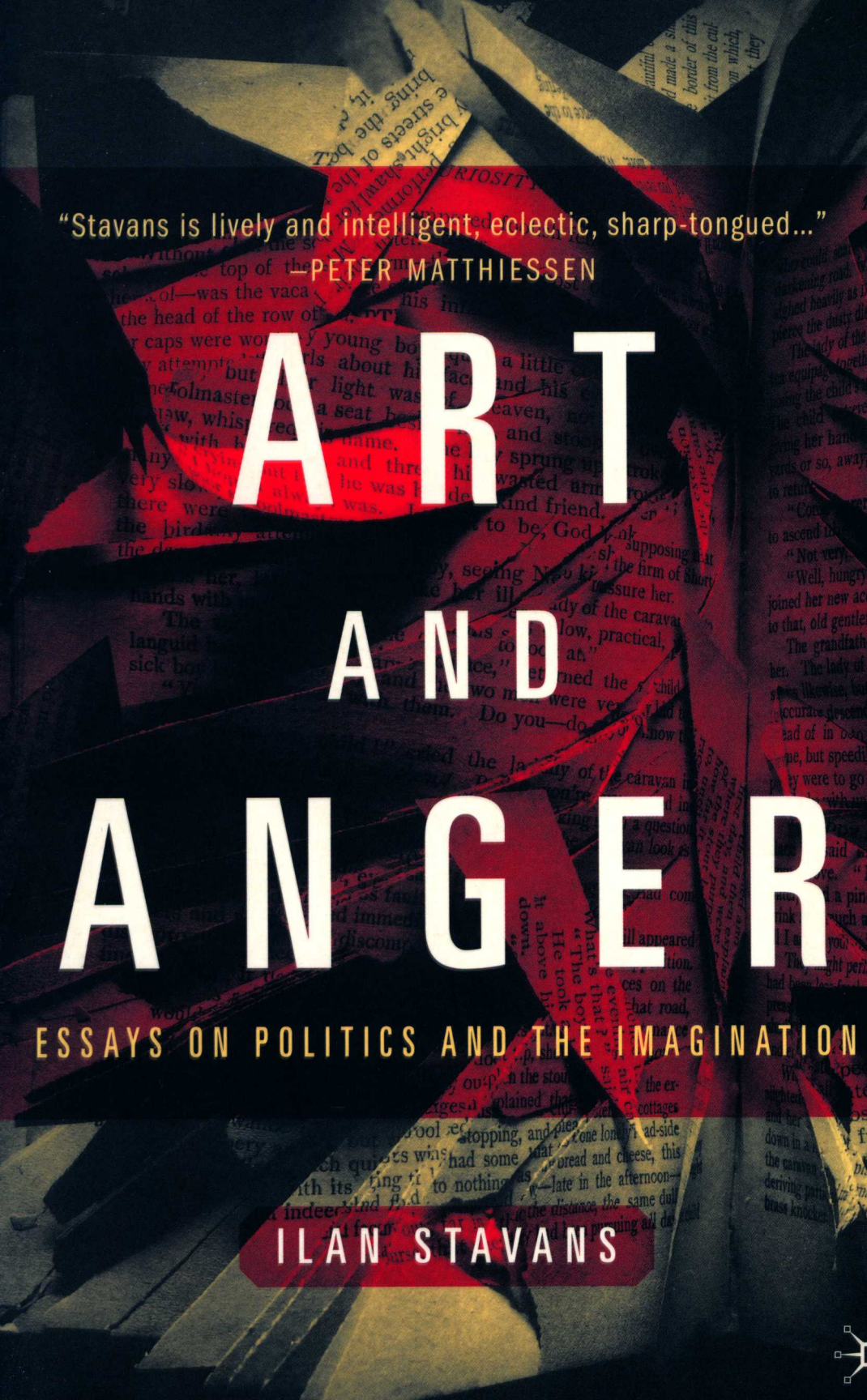
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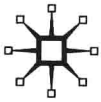

ART AND ANGER

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for Liora Stavchansky

FOREWORD TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

Marcel Schwob once famously stated of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* that had it been confined to ten pages it would have been a masterpiece. Before sending this book back to the printer I was tempted to retouch it; to succumb to that temptation would have amounted to an act of betrayal, though. Literature is never a finished art. A series of retouches wouldn't have made any of these pages less perishable. Thus, I've limited myself to reducing the number of typos and to emending a handful of obvious mistakes.

A few of the pieces collected here have found a more expansive life elsewhere. In "Mexico: Four Dispatches" a character in the background moved to the foreground in *The Riddle of Cantinflas;* "Hello Columbus" became a long-breathed meditation on the Genoese admiral; the essay on Octavio Paz turned into a self-reflection on the itinerant nature of intellectual life; the portrait of Gabriel Garcia Márquez is the source of a full-fledged biography; and "Tongue Snatcher" lives at the heart of *On Borrowed Words.* But not only am I fond of these early versions and of the kaleidoscopic effect they achieve en troupe; in more than one case, I also judge the source to be superior to its descendant.

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ART AND ANGER

1 / LETTER TO A GERMAN FRIEND

Dear Thomas K.: Sorry I didn't answer your unexpected letter of May 8th, 1989, before, but I was quite surprised by it and needed some time to process its content. How would you have reacted if a perfect stranger astonished you the same way? I'll tell you how I did: I loved finding a Luftpost envelope in my mailbox, stamped in the Deutsche Demokratischer Republik. Surprises nowadays come in the form of a telephone call. The epistolary genre is agonizing; nobody wants to communicate through writing anymore, so romance and friendship, trapped in the technological wire, are losing a poetic side.

Twice you apologize for your rotten and precarious English. You say you learned it by yourself and it's ungrammatical. Don't worry! Words serve you well in the task of describing your curiosity, puzzlement, and existential dilemma. Besides, there's nothing to fear, English is not my mother tongue either. We're communicating in an alien yet neutral ground, neither yours nor mine. This, I believe, is a good beginning.

You explain you're a twenty-one-year-old Christian resident of Konitz, a small village in the hills of Thuringia, East Germany, who last July traveled with a few college friends just across the border to West Czechoslovakia. During a visit to Prague you entered the Old Jewish Cemetery and found while wandering around the tombstones a spare piece of paper: on one side it contained my home address, on the opposite, a wish to God.

It struck you as intriguing that a Jew would correspond with Heaven. So you copied the address on a memo pad and allegedly left the wish unread. Some nine months later, you write to me.

Prague, which the Third Reich intended to be a museum gathering

the folklore and paraphernalia of the extinct Jewish people, left a lasting impression on you. Possessed by what the eyes saw, you returned home to discover that your soul was now inhabited by a force questioning the surrounding reality and putting in doubt past beliefs. So you looked for documentary films and books capable of explaining the horrors of a holocaust perpetrated by your forefathers. And a dark, unpleasant shadow emerged, evidence of a sinful, malevolent ancestry.

But the research also brought you to an honest admiration for the stubborn survival instinct of the Jews. The melancholic air of Prague can certainly ignite a profound reaction like the one you had. I know it because I was there.

"We are children of one Father," you claim, "all brothers. All we want is to live in peace. So why the ethnic discrimination and racial excesses of today? Why so much aversion not only against the Jewish, but against foreigners and ethnic minorities in West Germany, the European community, and the rest of the world? Why wars in Ireland, Lebanon, and Israel?" You're asking difficult questions, Thomas.

Unfortunately, you happen to have reached a skeptic hedonist who thinks the world is neither developing nor regressing into a primitive and inhuman state, but stabilized at a dead end. If you had read my secret message (in English), you would have understood how irreverent it was. While I often request from God health and success in an enterprise for me and those around, I also question his rule.

You ask me for a self-portrait. Here it is:

I'm from Mexico, a country that opened its friendly hands to immigrants and refugees before and during the Second World War and where several thousand Jews made their home. To move to the United States I had to learn to respect, honor, and understand a pantheon of heroes, values, and loyalties alien to me before. Contrary to what's expected, it wasn't difficult. An immense number of illegal Mexican workers, fooling the border patrol, cross the Rio Grande every month. They look for better opportunities. But if living conditions are miserable in the native land, exploitation here is a form of welcome. Happily, since I'm a member of the People of the Book, changing homes and globetrotting, especially in peaceful times like ours—sorry, Thomas, if I contradict you but, when compared to fifty years ago, these are pleasant and fruitful decades—, didn't bring uncontrollable obstacles. I was able to master

the idiom quickly and was academically active from the beginning. Unlike some of my fellow Mexicans, I wasn't looking for better-quality housing or a sufficient salary. What I needed was intellectual freedom and a challenging environment in order to create. You see, Mexico is still intolerant in many respects, hesitant to debate ideas democratically, and lacking in a tradition that celebrates the spirit as producer and consumer of aesthetic beauty.

I got married in June of 1988 to an American Jew. The bridge that unites me to my wife, beyond love, is a collective memory, one evident in the culture we share. Her ancestors were Czech, mine Polish. Before and during the Holocaust the two families lived in terrible penury. Few survived, and the dead, many of them incinerated, saw their last days in camps like Auschwitz.

On our honeymoon we decided to return to family towns in Poland and Czechoslovakia that had been turned into mythology in our childhood. Parents and relatives believed the project was wrong; after all, marriage is a pact with the future, not the past. Yet voices in us refused to remain silent and demanded a settlement with death. In my ears one of these voices repeatedly whispered: "The annihilation of family members was the result of pure chance: Your granduncles perished, you're alive. Why? Because God rules the universe in a game of roulette. You got the lucky number!"

We kept a travel diary and when I received your letter, I returned to it. The entries describe our impressions of the Warsaw Ghetto, the bunker of Anielewicz and his heroic squad where everybody struggled against the Nazis until the very end, and the fancy Czech resort Karlovy Vary, where the educated of the nineteenth century took therapeutic baths. Reading its touching paragraphs, I refreshed the memory of our wonderful pilgrimage.

In Prague we met Mr. Alexander Dawidowicz. My wife had found his name and number in a tourist guide whose editor was convinced this tiny, old employee of Chedoc, the state-owned travel agency, knew everything about the city's Hebraic past: details, forgotten gossip, and legends of rivalry and treason between rabbis and noblemen. We stayed at the Park Hotel, a decrepit, architecturally outmoded building which the Czechs perceive as luxurious, and called Mr. Dawidowicz immediately after we settled in. Next day he came to us. What a delightful octogenar-

ian: His old-fashioned suits, heavy-graded spectacles, inexhaustible knowledge, and *joie de vivre* make him a character Mendele and Agnon would have adored. For us he ended up becoming Prague's most invaluable treasure.

Of course he wanted a few dollars for his friendship. So what? Alexander not only took us around, he practically adopted us as grandchildren. Exhilaration is the word that best describes his amazement when hearing his name was published in a tourist book. He was also very happy when we told him we wanted to see Kafka's different homes and *gymnasium*. "The Party detests Kafka and refuses to print his books," he told us, "but he's no doubt the best Czech *littérateur* of all times."

I'm telling you all about Alexander because, indeed, he was a decisive figure in our trip. While he disliked talking about himself, we persuaded him to explain facts and mementos about the Holocaust. What we discovered was an optimistic yet tragic biography. During the war, because of his enlistment in the army, Alexander couldn't possibly save his wife and children from the Nazis. He was stationed in the Ukraine, near the Black Sea, and on his return he found ghosts, death, and silence in Prague. His entire family had vanished, all swallowed in the mouth of an unmerciful destiny. Remorse took over. Alexander felt guilty for having abandoned his loved ones, and suicide became an alternative. Fortunately, he rejected it and chose perpetuation. It was not easy! It took close to a decade to find a wife; his youngest son today is around fifteen, and his wife, whom he introduced to us, is in her late thirties.

So there you have it, Thomas: Alexander Dawidowicz is the magnificent evidence of that Jewish stubbornness you so much admire. Had my relatives survived, a plausible life pattern would have been Alexander's. In our various encounters we had endless conversations about Israel, God, and the present. I asked him if Jews would ever stop existing in Czechoslovakia. "They are not allowed to!" he answered. We idealized his courage—a courage, I must say, expressed every day in the histrionic art of guiding visitors across Prague's labyrinthine map. For as you well know, in recent decades Czechoslovakia has become an attractive sight for German tourists (among them yourself). Its overwhelming beauty and strategic location bring people from all over but especially from Dresden, Munich, and Berlin, making both Germanies an important financial pillar of the fragile Czech economy. Alexander, victimized in

the past by Germans, now "humbly smiles" (his words) while showing the Smetana Museum, the bridges over the Moldau River, the Vaclavske Namesti Square, and the Jewish quarter. He comments on their baroque architecture and symbolism while never insinuating revenge. "No matter what I think or feel, it is not for me to judge," he announced while confessing to have had troubling nightmares for years.

It was he who took us to the Old Synagogue, where I was the tenth man in a Friday-night service, and guided us through the Old Jewish Cemetery. We went from tomb to tomb deciphering the hazy Hebrew letters. One impressed me in particular: that of the great Maharal of Prague, who is believed to have created a Golem with his wisdom of Kabbalah. This one is revered by both Orthodox and even many secular Jews in every corner of the world, and wax spreads over it from melted candles placed as marks of devotion. It's here that I wrote a wish to God.

Since I didn't have a spare sheet of paper, I wrote it on the back of a business card. I felt bad after doing it. "God ought not to be addressed on that sort of stationery!," I said to myself. I also remember commenting to my wife: "What if somebody finds my card? What if that person decides to trace me? You'll think it's hokey that I foresaw receiving your letter. Well, I didn't! I'm not a prophet. It crossed my mind, for a second or two, that leaving my address behind in such an open space could be understood (if not by anybody, at least by God) as an invitation to an unexpected encounter. Little did I know that by doing it, I was promoting a future correspondence with a German.

I'll explain: By choosing Poland and Czechoslovakia as sights for our honeymoon, we were unconsciously rejecting Germany. Of course we never had it in mind to travel to Leipzig or Frankfurt, but selecting Eastern Europe was an indirect repudiation. Capable of reviving old wounds, we knew images of cruel Nazi and Russian soldiers would emerge. We wanted that! We wanted to unmask our past and accept its fatalistic status. And to be honest, nothing would have offended us more than being involved with Germans. When Alexander wanted us to accompany his tours with German groups, we refused. (During our rendezvous in the Old Jewish Cemetery, we did talk to a Turkish German girl, but she was Jewish, or at least thought she was.)

What am I trying to express? That Judaism is less a religion than a past collectively shared. When my wife and I left Warsaw, our final stop,

we believed ourselves to be ready for a common future. The whispering voices inside our ears were now acknowledging that if only accidents rule Nature, each individual must take full responsibility for his own life and live it to its limits. After all, the apparent state of things can suddenly change from one minute to the next and bring the end (in the form of war, a terrorist act, or an unexpected assassination).

Why did a Christian German like you pick up my personal message? For weeks I saw in your behavior a cycle in history—the dialogue between a Jew and his God is once more intercepted by the enemy. But that's a mistaken interpretation. Your humane letter, Thomas, is a gesture of reconciliation I confess not to have wanted while I was in Eastern Europe. Yet by writing on a business card, perhaps unwillingly, I left the door open for it. A few weeks after your letter arrived I still wasn't ready for a reevaluation of feelings. Back in New York, why should I? Today, I am ready, I know.

Our civilized life is a precarious and insecure state of mind. It's a pendulum that alternates progress with barbarism, light with darkness. And I'm afraid it'll always do so! There's no end to war, Thomas, because war is a pivotal modulator of human energy. Victims eventually become victimizer, and vice versa. While one must never forget, it is essential to recognize that everybody destructs and is guilty of something.

You're still young, my friend. Maybe you'll disagree that human evil is inevitable. I truly hope so! Optimists are needed to combat our world's defects. Sorry again for the delay in responding and for not hiding the pessimism of my skeptical spirit.

Yours truly,

Post Script: By the way, in the message to God I impugn Him for having forgotten my relatives during the Holocaust. And I also requested three short-run wishes, two of which have been granted already. I've accomplished, as well, two errands He wanted me to perform.

We are not through with our epistolary encounter. Telephone calls to Heaven haven't been invented as yet, and the correspondence between us, permeated with poetry, continues.

[1989]

2 / TWO PERUVIANS

To abandon one's life for a dream is to know
its true worth.

—*Montaigne*

At what precise moment did Peru fuck itself up? Mario Vargas Llosa posed the query in his 1969 novel *Conversation in the Cathedral,* a multilayered narrative about Peru's haves and have-nots; and the query runs through public discourse on Peru at home and abroad. There is no easy answer, of course. Was it during the disastrous war with Chile in 1879, which threw a roadblock before the country's economic progress? Was it after the tyrannical two-part regime of President Augusto B. Leguía (1908–12, 1919–30), a national patriarch who promoted economic development in the interest of the small wealthy minority? Or during the dictatorship of General Manuel Odría (1948–56)? Did it happen when Fernando Balaúnde Terry, a moderate reformer and a populist, became president in a 1963 democratic election, only to be deposed five years later by a military junta headed by General Juan Alvarado Velasco? When the same Balaúnde Terry returned in the early eighties to govern as a Conservative? Or was it when Alan García, a highly popular Social Democrat, came to office in 1985 and refused to pay Peru's foreign debt to the International Monetary Fund?

Whatever date one might settle on, the devastation now seems incurable, as if apocalypse has already taken place. Massive emigration, a useless, overgrown bureaucracy, a decade-long guerrilla insurrection with tentacles that seem to be everywhere and headquarters nowhere—all this has turned the banana republic, comprising a narrow strip of 500,000 square miles, into the dead zone of the Pacific coast.

For many, life has come to seem unbearable, the future elusive. During the eighties, Peru's skyrocketing inflation was as unpredictable as the lottery. While the GNP maintained a downward spiral, dynamite

explosions and the assassinations of civilians and diplomats became part of the texture of everyday life—and they still are. With a population of some 24 million (50 percent Indian, 37 percent mestizo, and 13 percent white) concentrated in Lima, a megalopolis holding a third of the citizenship, Peru today is South America's time bomb. As its inefficient, bankrupt government flounders, ideological fundamentalists are at the brink of seizing power. If, in the Hispanic hemisphere, Fidel Castro's Cuba represents order under repression, contemporary Peru presents the mirror image of regression through chaos. Confusion, anomie, lawlessness—the present is in shambles.

Politically fractured and socially disfigured, today the nation is divided into two essentially opposed ideological projects, facing off belligerently: one identified with the principles and traditions of our fin-de-siècle Western way of life, the other attached to Marxism-Leninism and to the glories of the Inca empire—especially its last hero, Atahualpa, who was captured and killed by the conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Progress versus dogmatism, civilization versus barbarism—a bloody, all-too-common contest south of the Rio Grande.

Inasmuch as Peruvian society is led more by passion than reason, its multitudes clamor to be guided by a single mind. What they seek is not the direction of enlightened logic, but the personified will of a common dream, a common fear, a common desire to avenge collective injury. Their enthusiasm has been divided between two prominent figures, who together represent the spiritual cleavage of contemporary Peru.

On stage left stands Carlos Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, alias Presidente Gonzalo, the obese, bearded, psoriasis-suffering mastermind of the guerrilla movement Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path. Guzmán: a man who claims his five to seven thousand kamikaze followers have been preparing the one true path to a political paradise on earth. Guzmán: a man who, since his capture on September 12, 1992, and his uneffected death sentence a month later, has been ill, depressed, and rapidly losing weight as prisoner no. 1509, living out his days in solitary confinement—first in San Lorenzo, also known as El Frontón, an island prison of the Pacific coast, then in a specially constructed underground cell in Callao, where he is to spend the rest of his existence.

On stage right stands Mario Vargas Llosa, a tall, handsome, and el-

egantly dressed novelist and presidential candidate, who first achieved international esteem in 1963 with his debut novel *The Time of the Hero.* Vargas Llosa: a man who has come to personify Peru's Europeanized oligarchy and whom many see as the nation's link to reason and enlightenment.

So there you have it: a man of action and a man of letters—a sword and a pen. One a merciless ideological agitator, the other a refined prose stylist and a dilettante; one a dialectical materialist captivated by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the other an idealist and epicure whose literary imagination inclines toward Faulkner and Flaubert (among his favorite books are *Light in August* and *Madame Bovary*). Guzmán and Vargas Llosa, perfect strangers, have become twin emblems of Peru's search for a solution to its sorrowful reality.

Fate had them born two years apart in the very same southern state, Arequipa: Guzmán on December 4, 1934, Vargas Llosa on March 28, 1936. It is a state that shares its name with its capital, Peru's second largest city, founded by the Spaniards in 1540 not far from Lake Titicaca, and home to scores of romantic poets and revolutionaries. Guzmán and Vargas Llosa came from different social classes, lower-middle and upper-middle respectively, with no record of a tête-à-tête; and yet, as Vargas Llosa has acknowledged, it's not impossible that as children they saw each other at a bus stop or as passersby in Arequipa's downtown commercial district.

Both are members of a distinguished Peruvian generation commonly referred to in intellectual circles as *la generación del '50,* which also includes the writers Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Sebastián Salazar Bondy, José Miguel Oviedo, and José María Arguedas; the painter Fernando de Szyszlo; and the politician Hector Cornejo Chávez. Torn between a heartfelt patriotism and an adversarial relation to the status quo, between sympathy toward the aboriginal minority and an allegiance to global modernization, this generation, with Guzmán and Vargas Llosa representing its polar extremes, has had an enormous impact on Peru's recent history.

In spite of the families' different financial condition, the two men went to branches of La Salle, a prestigious Catholic school, Guzmán in Arequipa and Vargas Llosa in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the boy and