

The Maker

(1958)

Until then, he had never dwelled on the pleasures of memory. Impressions had always washed over him, fleeting and vivid. A potter's design in vermilion; the vault of heaven clustered with stars that were also gods; the moon, from which a lion had fallen; the smoothness of marble under one's lingering fingertips; the taste of boar meat, which he liked to strip with quick flashing bites; a Phoenician word; the black shadow cast by a spear on yellow sand; the nearness of the sea or of women; the heavy wine whose roughness he cut with honey—any of these could wholly encompass the range of his mind. He was acquainted with fear as well as with anger and courage, and once he was the first to scale an enemy wall. Eager, curious, unquestioning, following no other law than to enjoy things and forget them, he wandered over many lands and, on one side or the other of the sea, looked on the cities of men and their palaces. In bustling marketplaces or at the foot of a mountain whose hidden peak may have sheltered satyrs, he had

heard entangled stories, which he accepted as he accepted reality, without attempting to find out whether they were true or imaginary.

Little by little, the beautiful world began to leave him; a persistent mist erased the lines of his hand, the night lost its multitude of stars, the ground became uncertain beneath his steps. Everything grew distant and blurred. When he knew he was going blind, he cried out; stoic fortitude had not yet been invented, and Hector could flee from Achilles without dishonor. I shall no longer look upon the sky and its mythological dread (he felt), nor this face which the years will transform. Days and nights passed over these fears of his body, but one morning he awoke, looked (without astonishment now) at the dim things around him, and unexplainably felt—the way one recognizes a strain of music or a voice—that all this had already happened to him and that he had faced it with fear, but also with joy, hope, and curiosity. Then he went deep into his past, which seemed to him bottomless, and managed to draw out of that dizzying descent the lost memory that now shone like a coin under the rain, maybe because he had never recalled it before except in some dream.

This was the memory. Another boy had wronged him and he had gone to his father and told him the story. His father, letting him speak, appeared not to listen or understand, and took down from the wall a bronze dagger, beautiful and charged with power, which in secret the boy had coveted. Now it lay in his hands and the suddenness of possession wiped out the injury he had suffered, but his father's voice was telling him, "Let them know you're a man," and in that voice was a command. Night blinded the paths. Claspng the dagger, in which he felt a magic power, he scrambled down the steep hillside that surrounded the house and ran to the edge of the sea, thinking of himself as Ajax and Perseus, and peopling with wounds and battles the dark salt air. The exact taste of that moment was what he now sought. The rest mattered little to him—the insults

leading to the challenge, the clumsy fight, the way home with the blade dripping blood.

Another memory, also involving night and an expectation of adventure, sprang out of that one. A woman, the first to be given him by the gods, had waited for him in the shadow of a crypt until he reached her through galleries that were like nets of stone and down slopes that sank into darkness. Why did these memories come back to him and why without bitterness, as if foretelling of things about to happen?

With slow amazement he understood. In this nighttime of his mortal eyes into which he was now descending, love and danger were also in wait for him—Ares and Aphrodite—because he already divined (because he was already ringed in by) a rumor of hexameters and glory, a rumor of men defending a shrine which the gods would not save and of black ships roaming the seas in search of a loved island, the rumor of the Odysseys and the Iliads it was his destiny to sing and to leave resounding forever in mankind's hollow memory. These things we know, but not what he felt when he went down into his final darkness.