

**Death and the young man**  
**(The last hours of General Poncelet)**

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TRANSLATION

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(Time and places : 1867, in Paris, in the bedroom of General Jean-Victor Poncelet for the first scene of Act I and last scene of Act II and 1812-1813 in Krasnoï, in the steppes and in Saratov for the other scenes.)

**Cast in order of appearance**

The narrator, Death (the old death), Jean-Victor Poncelet (1788-1867) (see biographical note below)(the old), Madame Poncelet (1813-1889) (the spouse of Jean-Victor Poncelet), Death (the young death), first wounded man, second wounded man, first gravedigger, second gravedigger, first cossack, second cossack, Jean-Victor Poncelet (the young), first officer, second officer, a soldier, the soldier with the wooden leg, a paysant, Jean Rémy, Louis de Salvailles

**Biographical note of Jean-Victor Poncelet**

On 17<sup>th</sup> of June, 1812, Jean-Victor Poncelet, a graduate from the École Polytechnique and the École d'Application of Metz with the rank of lieutenant of the Corps of Engineers, receives orders to join the Grand Army in Russia and is attached to General Staff of the same corps. At Krasnoï, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November of the same year, he is made prisoner. On the following day, he begins the long march to the prison of Saratov, arriving there in March, 1813. From April he starts his research on Projective Geometry. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1814, the Treaty of Paris is signed by France and the powers aligned against her : England, Russia, Austria, Prussia, Sweden and Portugal. Napoleon is exiled to Elba. At the end of June 1814, after 18 months of prison, Poncelet leaves Saratov with his precious manuscripts. In France, while pursuing a military and administrative career, he becomes a great geometer and a brilliant inventor. He dies on the 23rd of December 1867.

*Dedication :*

*To Gonzalo, whose intellectual appetite and constant enthusiasm have been my companions in the luminescent spheres of mathematics and the maze of my writing.*

**Act I**

**Scene I**

Narrator (*slowly, clearly and with expression*) : -- On the afternoon of Sunday, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December in 1867...in a bourgeois apartment overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens, the old

general, Jean-Victor Poncelet, is resting in bed. ... He has been ill for some time. His wife, Louise Palmyre, busies herself around him, tidies the room, brings him something to eat, reads aloud to him, comes and goes in the bedroom. Death, an old woman, wrinkled and grey, is sitting in an armchair, handling her scythe with ease. Death and the general talk like old comrades or ... might this be a long monologue which strolls along memories of war, prison, mathematical discoveries?

Death (*in a theatrical voice*): -- 'Death and the young man' : Once upon a time there was an old, a very old general who was going to die early on the morning of Monday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December in the year of our Lord 1867.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*annoyed, surprised*) : -- Who? Me? Early on Monday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1867, imminently. I don't believe you. You have been announcing my demise ever since I first met you.

Death (*ignoring Poncelet's comment*) : -- That was a long time ago. The old general (*indicating the general*) was a young and dashing lieutenant ordered to rejoin the General Staff of the Corps of Engineers of the Great Army of Napoleon in Russia. (*Very theatrically, slowly and expressively.*) The lieutenant Jean-Victor Poncelet marches into war. Boom! Boom! Rataplan! Boom! Boom! Rataplan!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*in a tired and irritated voice*) : -- 'Death and the young man', this title is absurd. By wanting me to die in the flower of my youth, you refuse to get old. Look at you, all shrivelled up and look at me, no strength, no vigor. Go away! ... (*Angry*) I refuse to play the absurd role that you want to force on me. I refuse to look into what you consider to be the tragedy of my life. I refuse to allow you to judge me. ... (*Sad and meditative, talking to himself*). My fellow men will certainly not refrain from doing so once the casket is closed and ... in times to come, will they only remember my name, ... perhaps my principle of continuity

or even my wheel? ... (*Admiringly.*) Poncelet's wheel. ... (*He sighs resignedly.*) But they will quickly realize that my mathematical work stopped at Saratov on the banks of the Volga ... (*enunciating carefully*) in the freedom of a prison. ... It's all absurd. ... Haven't I accomplished anything, working without a break since I was twenty-five?

Death (*with a mocking voice*) : -- Very well! Very well! The general is not quite himself today. He is morose. He doubts the value of his work. If the problem is the title of the play, let us change it. How about 'Doubt and Death' or perhaps 'I doubt therefore I die' or better still 'Death and the old man'?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- That would be more accurate.

Death : -- Perhaps...but banal...An old death helping an old man to bow: nothing very tragic there...(Cheerfully.) However, our beginning was quite promising...Remember. You, a handsome young officer in the forefront of the war confronting the blood, the cries of despair, the whinnying of the dying horses, the deafening thunder of the canons. ... Do you remember our first encounter?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*sadly*) : -- I'd rather forget it.

Death (*as an incantation*) : -- Return to the universe of your twenties : your curiosity, your passions, above all your hopes. Break the chains of conventions which stifle you. Abandon your rigid wisdom to find again, one last time, the hope of your twenties encircled by a young death.

Narrator : -- On tiptoe, Madame Poncelet enters the general's bedroom. She places a bowl on the gueridon and rearranges the eider-down on the bed. As sadness takes hold of her, she makes an effort to appear cheerful and encouraging.

Madame Poncelet (*in a voice that tries to be cheerful and encouraging*) : --See what Monsieur

Dumas has just brought you : a compote of late apples from their orchard,... there is, I believe, a hint of ginger. Madame Dumas knows your weakness for the scent of ginger. ...You were sleeping, he didn't want to wake you up, I didn't insist. He'll come by again tomorrow.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- What kindness wasted on a moribund old man!

Madame Poncelet (*in a tone where admiration and love show through*) : -- My dear friend, I forbid you to speak in this way. You'll recover very soon. It's just a bad spell, the remains of a nasty cold which is taking time to clear up.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- You have the gift of comforting words.

Madame Poncelet (*gently scolding*) : -- Oh! No, ... the window is open again. Why must you insist on leaving it open? This humid December air is not recommended for rheumatism and pneumonia.

Death (*aside*) : -- This woman has the knack of irritating me. What a busybody! She controls everything, she has her eye on everything. I open the window, she closes it. I open it again and what does she do? She closes it again. For weeks and weeks on a row, there she is, attentive, smiling, never taking a moment's rest. Abnegation incarnate. The word 'sacrifice' branded on the rounded forehead of a perfect young woman. Atrocious! She doesn't give me a chance.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*tenderly*) : -- I have often slept under the stars. The cold air on my cheeks reminds me of my youth, my strength, my endurance ... fled.

Madame Poncelet (*lively and cheerfully*) : -- As soon as you feel better, we'll go walking in the Luxembourg Gardens.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I would like to see Dumas again, tomorrow morning, when he calls. If necessary, wake me up. I would like to ask him what he thinks of the letter I plan to send to the president of the Academy.

Madame Poncelet : -- Very well, my friend.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet leaves the room and gently closes the door behind her. Death and Poncelet get back to their conversation and reminisce over their first encounter.

Death : -- Nonsense! Nonsense! Stop making plans. Tomorrow morning : you will be dead and cold. The day after : six feet under. You can't escape. For once, your exhausted wife will not keep a watch at your door. At last, we will go off, just the two of us, old partners on the road to oblivion. ... Listen to me! I have asked you a question. Concentrate. Do you remember our first encounter?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*impatient*) : -- Je te répète que j'ai préféré l'oublier.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*impatient*) : -- I have already told you that I'd rather forget it.

Death (*mockingly at first, then slowly*) : -- Are you afraid? ... I'll help you out : ... It was four in the morning.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*nostalgic and pensive*) : -- It was four in the morning, ... in a Russia which disappeared from our sight like a mirage, ... a nightmarish hallucination, burning with fever.

Death (*nostalgically*) : -- It was four in the morning, the sky was still dark with night. I had just finished my last rounds before reveille.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*letting himself be caught in the game of reminiscences*) : -- It was your favorite hour. You had just to collect the last sighs that did not even leave sleep at your approach. At that hour, they don't struggle anymore.

Death : -- They are submissive lambs, small children asking for their mother's breast. (*Changing tone of voice : now brisk with gusto.*) But you! You were already on your feet and dressed, the proud lieutenant from tip to toe. You stood rigid, at attention, before a man who had just hanged himself.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- And then, ... I saw you.

Death : -- You were very handsome.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*pensively, slowly*) : -- You were so beautiful, red and violent.

Death : -- You were afraid.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I wanted to run away, but I couldn't take my eyes off the violence you contained.

Death (*in a reflexive mood*) : -- Why was it through this man that you saw me for the first time?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- The dead were my companions from the beginning of this long march. Why this one?

Death : -- Speak, let your memories wander aloud. You have lived your whole life with your emotions and feelings repressed as dictated by the cliches of the good patriotic soldier, the distracted scientist, the perfect husband.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*as if continuing a monologue without hearing Death, hunting for his memories*) : -- I saw you in the eyes of that man who had just died. ... A soldier of my regiment. ... He had hanged himself. ... The day before, he had saved a little blue flower from being crushed by his horse. I saw it, in the rising light, in his buttonhole, his eyes bulging, ... and you, ... so violent, red and beautiful, feasting on all those souls flying about like fireflies.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet re-enters the bedroom.

Madame Poncelet : -- Jean-Victor, would you like a bowl of chicken broth?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- No, thank you. I am not hungry.

Madame Poncelet : -- Would you like me to read to you?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- My dearest friend, go and rest a while, afterwards I would like to dictate a letter addressed to the president of the Academy. After I die, I wish to continue to be associated with the development of science in France. I will donate 50 000 francs and stipulate that the interest on this sum should be destined exclusively for the establishment of a prize in pure and applied mathematics.

Madame Poncelet : -- All right, dear. Let me plump your pillows. You should also get a bit of rest.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet continues to busy herself in the bedroom while the dialogue between Death and the general continues. After a while, she leaves noiselessly.

Death : -- Vanity! Vanity! Do you think that these few coins will spare you from universal oblivion? What outlandish pride! In fact, I never really understood you. Stunned at the sight of a man dangling from a rope even though you had seen the Grande-Armée loose a third of its men and animals before the beginning of any real fighting. But why was it that you saw me for the first time through that hanged man?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*reflectively*) : -- The chapters of our life go by so quickly. Then, suddenly, everything stops and images surge. These memories and the time wasted cause one so much pain.

Death : -- You were chasing after a fleeing Russia which left only ashes behind her. Yet you only see this hanged man haunting your memories and your lost times. ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*trying to remember, meditatively, slowly*) : -- All was fire, screams, amputations, blood, butchery ... and I ...I had a sliver in my thumb, a piercing bit of nonsense which kept me awake all night. He was afraid of death. He threw himself in to expurgate his obsession ... A private agony in the midst of public agonies required by the logic of war. The other suicides, the other dead had been only words ...devoid of sense and ...of memories. But, ... he was there in front of me, ...the dead that I needed ... to understand how much I wanted to live.

Death : -- Yes, you saw him, you saw me and ever since you avoid me like the plague!

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Even Napoleon died. He died worn out by solitude, this great general undefeated but for the plots of the Russian climate.

Death : -- And Waterloo? To listen to you Frenchmen, Waterloo was nearly one of his victories. Since when are the conquered more celebrated than their conquerors?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Waterloo? ... That`s another story.

Death : -- Napoleon always blamed your misfortunes in Russia on the winter climate. But the summer ... do you remember?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- We would suck stones to quench our thirst. We would put leaves between our teeth to protect our lower lips from the sun and dust. They were swollen and cracked. Chewing and drinking were torture.

Death (*as an incantation, slowly*) : -- At the beginning of the summer, five hundred thousand men crossed the Niemen.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*in the same tone as Death`s*) : -- At the beginning of the following winter, ten thousand survivors recrossed the Niemen.

Death (*slowly, same tone*) : -- Ten thousand survivors after crossing the Beresina.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*slowly, same tone*) : -- Yes, ... ten thousand survivors.

Death (*changing tone*) : -- Men are hopelessly idiotic. It`s their nature. A dictator, a despot appears and hup! march on for a few hours of glory preceding the final hecatomb. It has been

that way since the beginning and it will be thus until the end of what you call 'civilization'. You learn nothing from your repeated setbacks. You justify yourselves by preceding your actions with magic incantations (*emphatically*) : Fatherland! ... Honor! ... Duty!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*angry*) : -- These words have ruled my destiny.

Death : -- What horrors have been committed in their name.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*angry*) : -- Don't disparage them.

Death : -- It is too late. You understand absolutely nothing. You have sacrificed your genius to these incantations.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*pensive, introspective*) : -- These years are but an hour. An hour that we would like eternal, wrapped in oblivion which is eternal.

Death : -- No, you are mistaken. Remember Krasnoi. By then, the icy air had replaced the sultry air of summer. Cold had numbed your decency, the remnants of your humanity, ... even your will to live. Remember Krasnoi.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Oh! Krasnoi.

Death : -- Go on, remember Krasnoi.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*slowly and sadly*): -- Krasnoi ... was only a prelude.

Death : -- Yes, ... a prelude to the funeral march of the Grande-Armée. A prelude to the Berisina.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- And for me, a prelude to the long march in the frozen steppes.

Death : -- You didn't witness the horror of the crossing of the Berisina. So many dead, a real epidemic. They were trampled, unrecognizable, anonymous, without interest. There was nothing more to do after the crossing of the Berisina. So I went back to the icy steppes and found you again.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- You stuck to me like a leech from the cold and never left me.

Death : -- I thought you were mine then. At twenty-five, you all have such a thick shell of immortality that my victory would have been all the more striking. While now ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*discouraged, yet with a mildly exalted beginning*) : -- Oh! My present continues to dissolve into the past and the future no longer draws on my present. ... You want me to dive again into the heart of those terrible days by the imagination of the memory? (*Crescendo in the following enumeration.*) Recreate imaginary massacres, imaginary amputations, imaginary burns. Listen again to the screams of the French, the oaths of the Germans, the blasphemous supplications addressed to God by the Italians and those addressed to Virgin Mary by the Spaniards and Portuguese. ... (*Then more softly.*) Images, sounds, smells, tumbling against each other on my death-bed, when all my life I kept them locked up in safes.

Death : -- At Krasnoi, your companions left you for dead on the battlefield. But I couldn't take you with me : there was still too much life in you, too many aspirations, too many unrealized ideas. Go, take the road to Krasnoi, I will find you again there.

*During this last cue, a dramatic passage of 'Death and the maiden' is heard louder and louder and then, cries of pain, cannon blasts, horses neighing, moans, barked commands. All the sounds of the suffering and horror of war.*

**Scène 2**

Narrator : -- Here we are, transported into Russia, on the 18th of November, 1812, on the battlefield of Krasnoi, after the defeat. (*A crescendo from the beginning to the end of the following sentence.*) A scene of metallic hell, bloody, animal, inhuman; of screams, groans, pleas, dead horses, some wounded, blood and more blood, smoke and flames in the midst of whirling snow and frozen mud, overturned wagons, abandoned guns, twisted cannons.

Women and children plunder the dead and strip them of their clothes. Two gravediggers put human limbs found scattered in the battlefield into their wheelbarrow. They dig graves and bury the bodies without further ado. Poncelet, in a lieutenant`s uniform, with a head wound, unconscious, is abandoned by his comrades who believe him dead. Death, dressed in red from head to toe, young, beautiful and provocative, walks on the battlefield and rejoices at the sight of such an abundant harvest of corpses, dying men, dislocated bodies. She laughs full-throated. Amidst this mêlée, the Cossacks arrive and make prisoner everything that moves.

Death (*kneeling by Poncelet lying in his own blood*) : -- Oh! Handsome Adonis, give me your last breath. ... He sleeps. Has my brother Hypnos taken him under his wing? Why him, the one I desire? This blood around his head is his funeral crown of poppies. He refuses to live, (*taking his hand and pulse*) ... however, he refuses to die. How handsome he is, abandoned to this deep sleep which plays blindman`s bluff with life and death! ... (*Vehemently.*) But I will wait for you. You have won me over. ... You belong to me. ... You will return to me.

Narrator : -- Death sets out again towards other dead and dying men. She stops in front of two wounded men who are bickering.

First wounded man : -- It hurts, ... ooh, it hurts! ... I am thirsty. Water. Give me something to

drink. ... My mouth is black from salpeter.

Second wounded man : -- Drink your piss and stop complaining. We are all hungry, thirsty, cold and sore. ... Shit! But, where is my leg? Where is it? ... Oh God ! My leg. My leg. Who took my leg? Oh dear mother, you had given me two the day of my birth. Now I only have a stump. My hand is full of blood. My blood is draining away. Help! Help!

First wounded man : -- Now you are the one who cries like a stuck pig. The pain of others doesn't make us suffer. Does it? We can then allow ourselves some words of advice. Piss blood, my friend. We'll use it to make blood sausage. It won't make me feel worse.

Death : -- These two are too healthy. No. I won't waste my time. They don't stop bickering. ... In fact (*pretending to give an explanation to the public*), I know this symptom. This is brotherhood disguised as grumbling. But, what are those gravediggers doing?

First gravedigger : -- What a mess! All these limbs lying around. ... A head here, a trunk with two arms there, a leg, the other one, where is it? ... Could we make a man with these bits or maybe a Golem? ... God forgive me for these thoughts. ... In the long run, maybe this head will accept these scattered limbs. Will it understand the reason for this promiscuity?

Second gravedigger : -- Stop philosophizing my friend. We've got to bury as many of these stiffs as we can before the ground freezes. Hurry up. ... I'm sure this head prefers a complete body even though it is not his own. Just picture this head before the Supreme Judge at the end of time : ' Head, head, what have you done with your body?' And the head answering 'I lost it in the lands of Russia'.

First gravedigger (*addressing the second gravedigger*) : -- Look, here is another leg, you can put it in the

Second wounded man : -- No! No! That`s my leg. I recognize it. Don`t touch it. Give it to me. It`s mine. Look, it matches my other boot.

First gravedigger : -- What are you going to do with your leg? You`re not going to put it in your knapsack, are you?

Second wounded man : -- Give it to me. It`s mine. ... It`ll replace my horse.

First gravedigger : -- He`s going crazy, he raves. A leg to replace a horse! Let`s finish him off. We could then bury a whole man even if his leg is detached.

Second gravedigger (*calmly and deliberately*) : -- He`s not crazy. ... He`s hungry. ...The cold makes him forget his pain, but not his hunger! Come on, leave him alone.

First gravedigger : -- You are the one who is crazy. You really think that he is going to eat his leg?

Second gravedigger : -- They eat their horses all right. I`ve seen all sorts! Come on. Let`s not hang around here.

Narrator : -- The two gravediggers approach Poncelet, unconscious, in a pool of his own blood.

Second gravedigger : -- Look at this one, he`s in one piece.

First gravedigger : -- Have you seen all this blood? Look, he is snoring like a forge. Will he live, will he die? Heads or tails?

Second gravedigger : -- We can't wait for him. He is so young. Maybe he'll make it this time.

First gravedigger : -- To die on another battlefield.

Second gravedigger : -- I know this is absurd, but I'm going to try to stop the bleeding.

Narrator : -- The gravedigger bandages his head with a dirty rag that he takes from his pocket.

First gravedigger : -- This battlefield is a real cemetery.

Second gravedigger : -- One should never go into cemeteries at night as misfortune is ready to strike. My father used to say that one could go, if forced to, without troubles provided one goes at odd hours : nine o'clock, eleven o'clock. Let's hurry up.

*They leave. The squeaking of the wheel barrow is heard.*

First gravedigger (*in a conversational tone*) : -- You hear the squeals of my barrow's wheels? From the sound of the wheels you can tell whether the dead is saved or not. Quietly and he goes straight to heaven. Squealing, the louder the squeals the longer the punishment.

Second gravedigger : -- The one you carry. Oh! He'll undergo it for a long time!

First gravedigger : Ah! For that, he'll undergo it for a long time!

Second gravedigger (*looking around, declaiming sadly*) : -- Feet, noses, hands, ears torn off by the Siberian cold are the only banners left on the battlefield.

First gravedigger (*on the same tone*) : -- And the raging winds are the only military anthems.

*Raging winds and the uproar of a storm are heard. A passage from 'Death and the Maiden'.*

Death (*with a dramatic gesture, addressing all the dead*) : -- I am your vanishing point. I am the perspective of your frayed lives, and the one who scatters your poor remains.

Narrator : -- Two Cossacks arrive on the battlefield.

First Cossack : -- These men are ghosts coming straight from the grave, not soldiers. They have no weapons, no ammunition. Let's try to find some French officers and bring them back to the headquarters. Field Marshal Prince Miliradowitch and his officers would like to question some of them.

Second Cossack : -- But what can the poor devils tell us that we don't already know? Bodies with limbs amputated. Carcasses of cannons, empty military stores, gutted wagons, horses frozen in a motionless gallop.

Narrator : -- The two Cossacks see Jean-Victor Poncelet and bend over him.

First Cossack : -- Look, this one is an officer, probably a lieutenant. In these rags I think I can make out the remains of epaulettes.

Second Cossack : -- He's alive. Look at his eyes. He's trying to open them. ... His heart is beating. Let's take him to headquarters. ... We'll take advantage to warm up and drink a good draft.

Narrator : -- The Cossacks drag Lieutenant Jean-Victor Poncelet by the armpits to headquarters. They enter a room where two officers are seated. Very courteously, they greet Jean-Victor Poncelet who, unsteadily, hands over his sword as he introduces himself.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*expressing himself with difficulty, one can hardly make out his name*) : -

- Jean-Victor Poncelet, lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers, attached to the General Headquarters of the Corps of Engineers.

Narrator : -- The first officer comes forward, takes Poncelet`s sword, and smiling, gives it back to him.

First officer : -- Sit down, Lieutenant. A glass of wine? ... An honest wine, far from the Chambertin that your Napoleon drinks. ... I have been told that he drinks a bottle of his favorite wine every evening, while his soldiers lie dying of hunger, thirst and cold.

Narrator : -- Poncelet drinks the glass of wine. ... Too quickly. ... He tries to appear calm and dignified, but hunger, thirst, cold, wounds render him vulnerable to kindness.

Second officer (*laughing, teasingly*) : -- General Wilson told me that Jerome Bonaparte bathes every day in a wine bath that Warsaw has to provide. What a family! Do you think that his servants drink the wine afterwards?

First officer (reasonable) : -- Don`t tease our poor lieutenant. ... Fill his glass again and let`s drink to St. Michael`s day. (*Addressing Poncelet.*) St. Michael is the patron of our Field Marshall.

*The beginning of the song : ‘Auprès de ma blonde ...’ is heard from a party next room.*

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*speaking with difficulty, hesitating*) : -- No. No. ... (*They lift their glasses but without drinking*) Allow me. ... Let`s rather drink to the end of this war. But ...what do I hear? A French song?

First officer (*the glass ready for a toast*) : -- We have with us a commissioner of war from your army. A prisoner of note. He is a guest of our Field Marshall. ... He seems much more diplomatic than you and goes along more easily with our toasts!

Second officer (*again serious and severe*) : -- Your comrades abandoned you on the battlefield. You are our prisoner and you will leave for Saratov tomorrow with a convoy of prisoners. ... This evening, on the other hand, you are our guest. (*Smiling.*) No formal attire is required! However, you will find in the room that we place at your disposal for the night, some clothes that will replace the remains of this uniform to advantage.

First officer : -- Good! But first, let's lift our glasses and offer a toast to the end of this war.

The three together : -- To the end of this war! (*They drink their wine.*)

Narrator : -- Poncelet goes to the room placed at his disposal, and returns dressed in warm, clean clothes. He still has a bandage on his head, but it is no longer the previous dirty rag. In the meantime, the servants have placed a white tablecloth on the table, brought some bottles of wine, plates and silver serving dishes of food. The two officers and Poncelet take their places at table.

Second officer : -- Our cooks are so ingenious. They succeed in concocting stews with faint whiffs of meat. Bon appetit. Enjoy each bite. I don't know when you will have the opportunity to have such a good meal again!

Narrator : -- Suddenly, after quickly swallowing a few mouthfuls, Jean-Victor Poncelet looks attentively at one of the two officers.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*hesitating, then more quickly*) : -- But, ... I know you! We met in Paris. You studied at the Ecole Polytechnique. When I started you had already been there for two years. You are ... Yvan Dorinovitch.

Second officer (*surprised, then enthusiastically and joyfully*) : -- Oh goodness! Your face looked familiar ... you are ... Jean-Victor Poncelet! I didn't get your name when you introduced yourself. I didn't recognize you under those bandages and rags. ... What a pleasure to see you again! ... What a joy to see a familiar face. ... What memories, all of a sudden! ... Paris, ...la belle vie, the beautiful women, the good wine, the friends, ...the parties. ... The joy, the carefree life, the youth. It all seems so far away to me now. ... Paris, her streets, her avenues, her monuments. ...How I would love to see Paris again! ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*nostalgically*) : Paris, ... The Seine and its bridges. ...

Second officer : -- Do you remember the night when I took you to your place dead drunk? You had verbal diarrhoea, and others ... let's say, more liquid ones! You mouthed off gloriously and disgorged copiously. It was, if I remember well, the first time that you got drunk. The neighbors wanted to throw you out. What a racket!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*a bit scandalized*) : -- And it was the last! I assure you. It was the first time that I had drunk vodka : a sneaky, fiery poison which ran through my veins. How different from our gentle country wines.

First officer (*sententious*) : -- Don't despise our vodka. Some day it may save your life.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*as if lost in a dream, sighing*) : -- I feel as though I am dreaming. ...Yesterday, trying to gobble a bit of raw horse meat in a temperature of twenty-five below zero.

Second officer : -- Today, with a head-wound, abandoned by your comrades who thought you dead.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Your cossacks picked me up and brought me here, before you, into this room where a real wood fire is crackling. And to hear you now, you, my friend, praising the charms of Paris ...

First officer : -- Enjoy this night. Your dream, unfortunately, will end at daybreak. A long march to the banks of the Volga, 300 leagues of unforgiving cold.

Second officer : -- Very few prisoners make it.

First officer : -- And Saratov is not heaven on earth. Even if, after the cold of the steppes it will feel like the Promised Land.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Why send us so far? I've been told that Russia is bursting with prisons.

Second officer : -- We're afraid of a lightning strike by Napoleon. We are sending the prisoners as far as possible because we fear a revolt if his return were announced.

First officer : -- We have one hundred thousand prisoners held by the Cossacks marching the length of the Russian roads.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Your cossacks are experts in the art of using the knout from what I'm told.

Second officer : -- Black bread will be handed out daily.

First officer : -- Some nights our peasants will welcome you into their humble huts.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*as if to encourage himself*) : -- Still, you haven't succeeded in beating Napoleon.

Second officer : -- You've lost thirty thousand horses in four days. We know precisely, the state of destitution crushing the Grande-Armée ...

First officer : -- Whose only grandeur lies in its name. ... Nonetheless, our Czar had warned the Count of Narbonne. He told him that he was convinced that Napoleon was the greatest general in Europe, that his armies were the best trained, that his lieutenants were the most courageous. But he had added : 'Space is a barrier. If I pull back with my people before this magnificent army, if I allow time, the deserts and the climate to defend Russia on my behalf, perhaps then, I will have the last word on the most formidable army of modern times.'

Second officer : -- They say that Napoleon was very impressed by those words. But the die was cast. He wanted to march in front of all the nations of Europe. Two resisted him: Russia and England. He was going to crush one while triumphing over the other. His spirit elevated him above the elements which he thought he could dominate the way he had dominated nations. His success rendered him invincible.

First officer : -- He believed a simple blow to the heart of our empire, in Moscow, would bring it to its knees. But he came up against an implacable strategist : our great general Winter.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (discouraged) : -- Summer had been as unbearable.

Second officer : -- We know. You lost a third of your supplies in men, animals, arms and food.

First officer : -- Summer had sapped your will.

Second officer : -- We knew all about the state of the Grande-Armée. 530,000 men crossed the Niemen, 1,000 canons, 30,000 wagons, 150,000 horses, several thousand officers and all kinds of aides.

First officer : -- A third of this army consisted of French soldiers, the rest were Belgians, Carinthians, Dalmatians, Bavarians, Poles, Austrians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Danes, Swiss, Prussians, and so on.

Second officer : -- Your army was a real Tower of Babel.

First officer : -- You treated your allies like dogs. The Poles and the Germans had neither fodder for their horses nor rations for themselves.

Second officer : -- They didn't dare come near a fire lit by the French to keep off the mosquitos or to warm themselves up on rainy nights. ... They were rebuffed pitilessly. ... What hate between these countries!

First officer : -- But what could the French do without them?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (sadly) : -- I'm overwhelmed. Yet, I can't deny the facts. (Revealing his despair with animation.) Since the beginning of summer, we have chased after a phantom army which left burnt fields and abandoned villages in its wake.

First officer : -- An army marching before you, disciplined, without abandoning a single cannon.

Second officer : -- You advanced in disorder in the ruts dug by our army's wagons.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (slowly, then crescendo) : -- The mosquito bites, ... the thirst that stagnant water couldn't quench, ... the suffocating blinding dust which blocked nostrils, covered eyes, dried throats. You have no idea of the thickness of the tunnel of dust which covered us and in which the rays of sunlight danced a devilish jig. We were in an oven, suffocating and even night couldn't refresh the base of that tunnel. ... (Then in a pensive tone.) Several hundred young men committed suicide because they couldn't stand the maddening dust any longer.

Second officer : -- At other times, it was the rain that transformed this dust into insidious mud and which, at night, made you shiver.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (raising his voice) : -- The horses had to remain saddled because of the constant threat of the Cossacks who were like insects themselves. ... Come, sirs, I'm becoming incensed. Please forgive these memories which prevent me from doing honor to these fine dishes. ... But, ... these tortures took the lives of many of my comrades.

First officer (in a meditative tone) : -- We could guess right away, by looking at a field or a village, whether it had been crossed by your army or ours. Our excrement breathed health, yours were only a foul liquid. You had nothing left to eat but horse-meat which gave you dysentery. Your horses and men had colitis and diarrhea.

Second officer (laughing) : -- This isn't conversation for the table! Happily, the fair sex isn't honoring us with her presence.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- There is so much room for dust and mud in Russia. Everything disappears in this landscape, even the villages and their inhabitants.

First officer : -- They tell me that, when you went to see your superior officers to obtain food for your horses, they would answer that their duty was to send you into battle and not to feed you.

Second officer : -- I saw your horses reduced to eating thatch from houses still unburned.

First officer : -- I saw soldiers flat on their bellies drinking horse piss in the ditches; those pitiful horses that sometimes went thirty hours without eating or drinking.

Jean-Vicotr Poncelet : -- We finally arrived in front of Moscow. No one came to present us with the key to the city. The Russians preferred to emigrate to Siberia rather than submit to Napoleon.

First officer : -- And you seem surprised!

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Moscow was in flames. Four miles from the main fire, we could read a letter as if in broad daylight. Finally, in spite of everything, we entered the city. Enough wine and food were left to fill our empty stomachs. Our morale improved.

Second officer : -- The few Russian prisoners you took told us they had never met such a stinking army. You hadn't washed since Paris and you said that we, Russians, were barbarians.

First officer : -- And that your allies were dogs.

Second officer : -- There was not a shred of Christian charity in your army.

First officer : -- No chaplains travelled with you and I think most of you didn't believe in an afterlife.

Second officer : -- Except, of course at the moment of their death.

First officer : -- Suddenly, God acquired popularity due to the panic of your atheists at their imminent end.

Second officer : -- Half of the churches were completely burned and the other half were badly damaged. A real sacrilege.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (in an accusing tone) : -- It was you who started the Moscow fire. You even took away everything that could be used to stop it. We couldn't find a single fire hose. ... We wanted to stop, rest and set up our winter quarters in Moscow, but Napoleon understood the dangers of a Moscovite winter and gave the order to leave.

*A break in the conversation. Songs, laughters and talking from the next room.*

Second officer (pensively) : -- Our Czar consistently refused to sue for peace. His predictions were coming true.

First officer (*meditatively*) : -- It was too late for you. Winter was arriving at full gallop.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (sadly) : -- Nonetheless, the Russian prisoners had warned us. They told us that, in less than two weeks, the cold would become unbearable, that our nails would fall out, that our weapons would drop from our swollen hands and from our fingers half rotten with gangrene.

Second officer : -- You left Moscow, blowing up all that was left standing.

First officer : -- But the loss of Moscow is not the loss of our motherland.

Second officer (*proudly*) : -- Moscow burned, but Mother Russia knows how to heal her wounds.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Larrey, our surgeon in chief who, at Borodino had to perform two hundred amputations in twenty four hours said that, in the entire Spanish campaign, he had not suffered as much.

First officer : -- Suffering is a poor teacher.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- One day, I heard Marshall Ney say : 'Those who return will have their balls held on with iron wires.'

First officer : -- And the rest?

Second officer : -- Those with frozen balls stuck a gun in their mouths.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*meditatively*) : -- In a few hours, a dead horse would freeze as solid as iron. We didn't have time to wait to cook it. So, while the poor horses could hardly walk, they were bled to make blood sausage or, when there was no fire, a kind of raw blood sherbet.

Second officer (*suddenly accusingly*) : -- Oh! But I saw worst. You would even cut their necks, their flanks, their hindquarters. They became walking carrion, cold preventing the blood from running freely. They felt no pain, they were anesthetized.

First officer (*pensively*) : -- Yes, it is true, the cold stops hemorrhaging and limits infection.

Second officer : -- They could walk this way for several days.

First officer : -- Then, little by little, the color of the clotted blood changed from red to a yellow pus.

Second officer : -- The Russian prisoners' predictions came true. You were losing parts of your body. Your toes, your fingers, your ears, your noses were falling off.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- We weren't even aware of it. Ice swelled in our clothes, it cut our circulation. ... At first there was no pain.

First officer : -- Yes, just numbness, then, generalized stultification.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- An enormous white shroud separated us from our sensations.

First officer : -- You were ghosts, automatons whose faulty mechanisms still had the power to make you take a few steps forward.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- When this power petered out, we lay down and we died.

First officer (calmly) : -- If order had prevailed in the army at Smolensk, you would have had enough fodder and flour to rebuild your strength. But you were beyond all organization, civility, obedience, humanity. (Louder and accusingly) All was wasted or stolen by the strongest who pilfered shamelessly and resold at usurious prices what should have belonged to all. ... You took to the road again, even weaker than at your arrival.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (showing signs of fatigue, he yawns, then hesitatingly) : -- Yes, but we shall return. ... We haven't lost the war, ... hardly a battle. Napoleon will return.

Second officer (*reasonably*) : -- Our friend is exhausted, let him rest. (*A pause in the*

*conversation*) But tell me : After the Ecole Polytechnique you went to Metz. Isn't that right?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*hiding a yawn*) : -- Yes. I went to the Ecole d'Application of Metz.

Second officer : -- We need men who can build bridges, engineers capable of drawing plans to build blockhouses, forts, redoubts, hospitals.

First officer : -- Why not join us? Why accept the awful fate that awaits you on the long march to Saratov.

Second officer : -- Very few prisoners survive the journey to these far off prisons. Winter is particularly cruel. Why waste your talent, your long years of study?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (all of a sudden awake, proud as a cockerel) : -- Gentlemen, I thank you for your hospitality. May I have your permission to retire, the road to Saratov, as you have said, is long. Adieu, Yvan Dorinovitch. I will wait for you in Paris, after the war.

Narrator : -- Poncelet retires to his room and the two officers continue their conversation.

Second officer : -- Too bad he didn't accept our offer.

First officer : -- Too bad he is as proud as we are!

Second officer : -- Jean-Victor was considered one of the most promising students in his division. But he didn't take care of his health and fell ill with a rebellious, intermittent fever. His health has been precarious ever since. He'll never survive that long march.

First officer : -- The situation is terrible on the roads. I have just received a report which gave me goosebumps. Fifty prisoners were burned alive and fifty others buried alive by the peasants. The peasants, sometimes helped by the Cossacks, steal the prisoners' clothes and

leave them naked on the road. The Czar can't do anything. The peasants believe killing a prisoner is an act of patriotism.

Second officer : -- How to convince them to the contrary when they have seen Russia run away cowardly from herself, leaving only ashes in her retreat. Those peasants have lost everything. Don't ask them to understand our generals' strategy.

First officer : -- Brutality engenders brutality. Doesn't the Bible teach us "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"

Second officer : -- Haven't we learned anything over all these millenia?

First officer : -- Sometimes I ask myself if Napoleon wasn't more cruel than us to his Grande-Armée.

Second officer : -- Let's go to bed, you're talking rubbish!

First officer : -- I'm not joking. History will judge.

*An excerpt from 'Death and the Maiden' is heard.*

### **Scene 3**

Narrator (slowly, explaining in a dramatic tone) : -- At dawn the following day, the long march begins. The convoy of unfortunate prisoners accompanied by mounted Cossacks, dogs and some curious onlookers sets off for Saratov on the banks of the Volga, at 1200 kms of cold, snow, hunger and thirst. Poncelet quickly realizes that his physical resources won't allow him to survive in these extreme conditions. His wit, will and memory alone can save

him. He walks, and walks, and walks blindly past the horrors and the pitfalls strewing his path. Death, a tall and slim young woman, dressed in ice and snow, as white as she was red and black in the previous scene, derides Poncelet and laughs at his will to survive. For five months, five long months of unspeakable suffering, Poncelet sees the convoy dwindle week after week. The days unroll along the whiteness of the icy steppes and the nights follow the path of the starry sky and the Milky Way. The prisoners cross villages, meet peasants, come across straight dogs, packs of wolves, frozen rivers, isolated huts. They go on, step after step, league after league, chilblain after chilblain, surrounded by Cossacks nearly as famished as themselves. Suddenly a soldier, prisoner like Poncelet, stops walking and speaks to him :

Soldier : -- Kill me, I can't go on, kill me, I can't take another step.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : --Calm down, come on, drink a bit of water. There will be a rest stop in a league. Still a little effort.

Soldier : -- No, no. I want to die right away and not bit by bit from fatigue, cold, hunger. Help me to die, lieutenant, not to live.

Narrator : -- A Cossack approaches Poncelet.

First Cossack : -- Move on, what is the matter?

Soldier : -- Kill me! I beg you. Kill me.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- No, no! Don't kill him, let me help him, I'll take care of him.

Soldier : -- You don't understand! Death is a kindness! Kill me! Here is my chest.

Narrator : -- Poncelet tries unsuccessfully to come between the soldier and the Cossack.

First Cossack : -- Why should I refuse you the kindness that you so desire? Here, ... die!

Narrator : -- The Cossack pierces with his lance the soldier who collapses. Other prisoners rifle his clothing, his haversack in hope of finding some crumbs of food or useful objects. The column comes to order thanks to generous knout lashes and marches on. The Cossack approaches Poncelet.

*Barkings, murmurings, howling of wolves, groans and knout blows are heard.*

First Cossack (speaking to Poncelet) : -- Why fight against this death, young lieutenant. It'll soon be your turn. This night will be even colder. You'll go to sleep and you'll never wake up.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (exhausted, in a tone of incantation, talking to himself) : -- No, I will live. Poncelet will save Poncelet. All my studies, all the ideas I have hatched won't fertilize the soil of Russia. I will return to France. I will do as Mellé did. He said if I save my horse, he will in turn save me. I'm worse off than Mellé, I only have myself left, but if I save Poncelet, he will in turn save me.

First Cossack : -- Poor you, you ramble already. Your end is nearer than you think.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (regaining some energy at this recollection) : -- No! Listen to me, I'm going to tell you the beautiful story of a horse called Cadet. His owner, Mellé, a French dragoon, believed come what may that if he saved his horse, his horse would in turn save him. Melle and Cadet had taken part in Napoleon's campaigns, from 1806, in Prussia, Poland,

Spain and Germany. I met them for the first time on the Russian campaign. I saw Mellé dig a hole with a pickaxe on the ice, in the middle of the lake, to find some water for his horse. I saw him weave through enemy lines to bring him back some fodder and some straw. The last time that I saw Mellé, he was on a burning roof trying to steal some thatch for his horse. He told me : "I'm free of the clutches of death while I think of my horse. It's him who saves me. I just give him a bit of water and some fodder." It's a beautiful story. Isn't it?

First Cossack : -- Now it's my turn to tell you a story. Before the ground froze, I saw one of your soldiers, both legs amputated, take shelter in the carcass of a horse who had just died next to a stream. He took the brain, still warm, of the horse and put it on his head to protect himself from the wind. A few days later, I saw him again. He hadn't moved. He was eating slices of flesh from the carcass which sheltered him. He drank water from the stream. Stagnant water full of corpses and scattered limbs. (*Vehemently.*) You are nothing but vultures. You will survive on carrion for a time, to become, yourselves, carrion for other vultures. ... What does the lieutenant think of this story?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (becoming vehement in turn) : -- No! No! I'm dreaming. I will wake up in Metz. I am at the theatre, playing the role of a prisoner of war. My soul will take me back, ... back to my own everyday life, my vanities, my familiar lusts. This role forces the sensations of cold and hunger on me. I am struggling against thirst and illness. My body is saturated with suffering and yet it moves on and on. ... No, no, no! It's not the end. It's not my death. I have energy, a lot of energy. ... (resignedly) I just have to find it, to winkle it out of its hiding place.

Narrator : -- Poncelet is worn out. He staggers. Death approaches him. She offers him absolute rest, but Poncelet continues his fight, step by step, supported by his memories.

Death (*reasonably and seductively*) : -- Why struggle like this? You are insane. Strip yourself of the weight of greedy humanity, full of rheumatisms and chilblains. Fly away like a bird. Why do you resist? ... Your features have taken on a slate-colored hue and lose the coherence of flesh.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*softly*) : -- Is that you again, my Death?

Death (*tenderly*) : -- Yes. I am **your death** and I am **Death**. I am the elusive ambiguity of the untenable particular and the anonymous universal. I am here only for you ... and I am here only for everyone. I will surprise you like a thief although you walk by my side every day. The more you get used to my presence, the more unfamiliar I will become to you. The more you tame me, the greater the distance between us.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*gently*) : -- My death, you are all white. I recognize you under the disguise of snow and frost, hoisting your crystal scythe. You sniff me out like a choice morsel. I am only skin and bone. You certainly won't feast on me.

Death (*maternally*) : -- So much obstinacy in this body tortured in amusement by cold and hunger. Come, come rest your head against me.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*in a monologue which oscillates between discouragement and hope, from one phrase to another*) : -- No, ... I won't listen to you. ... Now ... That's it. ... I must remember. ... I was under the command of Colonel Bouvier who was in charge of blowing up Smolensk. ... Yes, that's it. ... We stayed in Smolensk with the rearguard. After leaving the city, he was ordered to take command of the troops of the Corps of Engineers. Then, ...then, ... to Krasnoï. The Russians were already dug in there with thirty or forty thousand men? ... With thirty or forty thousand men? ... I don't know anymore. ... Marshal Ney had us charge with bayonets in order to take out the enemy's batteries and it was there that my colonel and two other captains of the Engineers were killed under fire. ...I only had my horse shot under

me, but I lost everything : horses, personal effects, money. (*Looking at his hands*) ... The only thing left to me was this life. This life which you want to take from me, you, my death. ...

Death (*tenderly*) : -- Now you are being sensible. Come rest in my arms.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*continues to exercise his memory, slowly, he doesn't react to Death's suggestions*) : -- I was wounded ... and captured while Marshal Ney retired with the scattered remains/ragged remnants of his army. ... Yes, that`s it. ... (*Then with gusto and joy*) I live. ... My memory still works. It's marvellous. ... It will print a diary of this journey which will keep me company and I'll be able to read it again every evening by the light of the Milky Way.

First Cossack (*pushing Poncelet roughly*) : -- Move on! ... You look vacant. You're standing day-dreaming. ... Move on, or else you will be left alone and the wolves will feast on the marrow of your bones. Move on! Next time I will slay you without giving warning.

Narrator (*reciting*) : -- At this point a soldier with a wooden leg, a prisoner himself, falls in behind Poncelet and tries, as well as he is able, to follow him. Poncelet is unaware of his presence. He continues his monologue. It`s dark and the column is still marching. The soldier with the wooden leg addresses the Cossack who was threatening Poncelet.

Soldier with the wooden leg (*to the Cossack*) : -- Don`t you worry. I'll make sure he doesn`t slow down the column. He is lost in thought, he is talking to himself, the poor thing. Look, he is walking now. He is not bothering anyone.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*continuing his monologue, oblivious*) : -- I walk, and I walk and I walk. ... Yes, but today I realized that I must rely on my memory. It is my memory that will hold me together and lead me back home. It is the friend that will keep me alive. I will save it and it will save me. ... It began to freeze at the end of October. ... We were sleeping on the ground and I tore my coat trying to wrest it from the claws of the frost which held it to the ground. ... I am so thirsty. ... But it shows that I'm alive, if I feel thirsty. Thirst runs in my veins like a new life. ... I live. ... (*He breathes in deeply. Looking at the stars.*) The stars are so close that I could almost touch them. They are so brilliant but, ... their fire chills me. Beauty is so close ... and so far. ...

Narrator : -- The column stops. The prisoners lie down huddled together near a meager campfire. They fall asleep amidst omnipresent nightmares.

*Silence is broken by the howling of wolves, the whinnies of a horse, the crackling of burning wood, the wind whistling in the trees. Then, after a moment, a cock's crow :*

Narrator : -- Finally, the first rays of sunlight weave their way into the clear blue of the sky, another day begins. Poncelet, awake before the others, looks into the distance.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- How odd to see the ruts dash through the snow as far as the eye can see and giving the impression of meeting at a far away point. (*Shows such a road.*) I could

never attain that point. ... Even if I walk days and nights in a row, that point will always be as far away. ... It is a point which, like all of Russia flees and flees until we are exhausted. ... It is a point at infinity. ... But let us see, the laws of perspective, as rediscovered by Brunelleschi, allow us to represent a road disappearing into a point of the horizon in a painting . This point, ... belongs to the painting after all. It is represented in the painting. But this point of the horizon, I am the one who perceives it. It comes into existence thanks to my point of view. ... I am the starting point to explore the world.

*The movements of a camp waking up are heard.*

Narrator : -- Slowly, the exhausted column starts marching again. The soldier with the wooden leg and Death still follow Poncelet who is lost once again in his thoughts. The soldier with the wooden leg offers him a cup of tea which he drinks distractedly.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My Lieutenant, I found some tea leaves which I put in a cup of hot water. Take it. Drink, it's hot.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Ah! Thank you. ... Brunelleschi, a man of the Renaissance. If I ever get out of this hell of ice, I will go to Florence to admire his dome. ... The Renaissance, the fundamental moment when man, invested with a new pride, set aside the absolute vision of God and **himself** became the source of light that illuminates and orders the objects of the world. ... **I**, and not God, see these parallel lines meet at a point on the horizon, a point at infinity. ... But where is this point at infinity? ... Is the horizon a line? Or is it a circle? ... The line at infinity? ... Do we need new principles to solve these questions? ... How do we create a geometry which incorporates all of these points at infinity, and integrates them along the other accessible points so that they will have equal rights to these accessible points? ... A geometry that would take into account man and his points of view. ... How would we harmonize these disparate points of view?

*The normal noises of a column of prisoners on the march are heard. The wind, always the wind, the moans, etc.*

Death (*walking behind Poncelet*) : -- His mind flies away following the capricious course of the lines at infinity. I'm losing my grip on him. These vast expanses which are killing his comrades inspire him with geometric constructions. I think that he is ready to breath his last but then his spirit awakens and resists me. (*Dreamily.*) I have often had troubles with his kind : mathematicians, geometers, ... I make an appointment and everything looks fine. Then, suddenly, their minds go wandering off into a theorem and they forget the appointment. (*Talking to Poncelet.*) Stop and listen to me! What is this point at infinity that you conjure up endlessly before you and which you seem to follow inexorably?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Look at the two verges of this road we are following, running along straight in front of us. Don't you see in the distance, they seem to come together at a black point, which could be a Cossack coming towards us? I imagine the two verges of the road as two lines and look: they are parallel. Look as far away as possible and what do you see?

Death : -- The two lines meet.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- That's right, but Euclid said that two parallel lines never meet. ... He had probably never walked these frozen wastes. He had probably never seen the snowy steppes of Russia.

Death : -- You are always speaking of space, of geometry. Time is the only thing that counts for me. ... (*In a solemn and emphatic tone.*) Your memory and imagination distort my time.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*no longer listening to Death, walking with a firm step and leaving her*

*behind*) : -- I would like to study the projective properties of figures. ... I would like to find the properties subsisting at the same time in a figure and all of its projections. ... Angles and distances are not preserved by projection. But then, what are those properties that remain invariant by projection? ... (*Then in a despairing tone.*) But what can I do without paper, pencil or books?

Death (*catches up with Poncelet and hears this question*) : -- Nothing. Nothing at all. You can't do anything.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*reasonable*) : -- I will let Pascal, Desargues, Monge accompany me on this long march. I will listen to their teachings, engraved long ago on my memory. Eyes closed, I don't need books or pencils. I can build imaginary constructions and visualize their projections in the space.

Death (*waving her crystal scythe, furious and tapping her feet*) : -- I hate memory! I hate imagination. You think and you warm up, your eyes smile and you have more energy than at the beginning of the day. (*She adopts an hypnotizing, monotone.*) However, you have no chance whatsoever. Let go. Put a stop to the mechanics of your meninx. Walk, walk, still one step, then another. You are a prisoner, your comrades think you are dead. It's twenty six below zero. The wind is unleashed. Lie down under this blanket of snow. I will cover you up, sleep, don't think about anything. Come, come.

*The whistling of the wind is heard. The prisoners are shivering with cold. Murmurs of suffering are heard. Some dogs bark, the horses are restless.*

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*thinking out loud, indifferent to what's happening around him*) : -- Yes, that's it. ... All the points at infinity of a plan must lie on a line, the line at infinity.

Death (*complaining*) : -- He no longer listens to me. He does not even react to me, to me, his young and beautiful death! He is but a monster, a monster of survival.

Narrator : -- The soldier with the wooden leg who followed Poncelet, approaches him.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My Lieutenant, may I walk with you?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Certainly, but I'm not very agreeable company. I think that even Death is sulking. She doesn't appreciate my remarks on geometry. ... She only loves time, ... the time that bring me closer to her.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- It's time I took him in hand. He speaks of death as of a person living by his side. He raves, poor thing. ... So young and already so mad!

Narator : -- They walk a few steps in silence.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My Lieutenant, I have three potatoes under my shirt (*he shows them to Poncelet*). We could share them at noon. ... Unfortunately, they have a taste of earth.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- When I eat earth to trick my hunger, I never recapture the taste of potatoes. That'll be a change. ... Thanks, my good fellow, your generosity touches me. We could cook them at the noonday stop. I have a tiny bit of salt in my trouser pocket.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- We'll have a feast.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- How did you get this treat?

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My friend gave them to me when he died. ... If we bleed the horse of that brute, the Cossack, we could make ourselves some blood sausage. Blood sausage and potatoes boiled with some salt.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I wouldn't do it, unless you want to taste the knout. That burns.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- I'd like to confess something that, up to the present, I have never told a soul. You will also understand why I am so glad that you agreed to share these potatoes with me. ... I have realized, to my great shame, that I am no longer worthy of being a man.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Don't talk like that. God, in his great mercy ...

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- No, no, listen to me. The day when, having taken some potatoes by force, I ate one right away and hid the others in my knapsack ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Come on, we would all have done the same thing. It's a question of survival.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- Please, sir, listen to the rest. This happened long before I became a prisoner. When my starving comrades saw me come back, they asked me if I had found something to eat and I said I hadn't. They, trustingly, believed me. The next day, I hid in a wood to eat another potato. But during the night, it had become as hard as stone. You see,

it was twenty below zero. I blistered my lips trying to take a bite. I returned to my comrades and when they asked me if I had found something, I showed them the frozen potatoes. They wanted to know where I had found them and I pointed to the wood where I had hidden to eat one. They rushed over there and, obviously, found nothing. They tried to heat up the potatoes, but they melted like ice. You know what they did?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Go on. Tell me.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- They invited me to share in the sausage they had made with the blood of the last horse accompanying them. .... I accepted and, in spite of my voracious hunger, swallowed more remorse than sausage.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- War, suffering, cold produce astonishing transformation in our characters. Acts of heroism and acts of cowardice are extremes that meet without depending on our will, on our everyday selves. Circumstances dictate them and man, obsessed by his torments, executes them.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- You want to comfort me, my Lieutenant. ...Thank you. ...To whom should you give a piece of bread when there are one hundred thousand men dying of hunger? ... But, is this a reason for me to eat two? Surgeon Larrey, he gave everything. Perhaps there are men born to be heroes?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Stop torturing yourself. Be kinder to yourself.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My Lieutenant, let me take care of you. Sometimes, when we cross villages deserted by men who have left to wage war, women moved to pity by our plight, with their young children still hanging on their skirts, dare to share their meagre pittance with us: rolls or a bowl of hot soup. You never put out your hand to receive this food.

From now on, I will do it for the two of us.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Why worry about me?

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- I can clearly see that you are not used to begging. You hardly eat anything. You have withdrawn into your head. Before we both became prisoners, I often saw you on horseback overseeing the construction of the raft bridges on the Dwina and the Dniepr. You were everywhere at once. At Smolensk, I saw you enter a ditch under terrifying fire so as to reconnoiter the enclosure.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I was just obeying General Haxo's orders.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- Let me help you. Perhaps helping you would I could redeem my act of cowardice.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- All right, if you wish, we'll walk along together.

Narrator : -- Poncelet and the soldier with the wooden leg continue on the road in silence. Around them, other prisoners complain, the Cossacks lose patience and Death laughs. Then, after a while, they return to their conversation.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*talking to the soldier with the wooden leg in fragments of phrases*) : -- The Russians have a good road system. ... The Russians nobles have made incredible sacrifices in order to save their country.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- They are not like our nobles whose only interest is to get richer.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- When I get back to France ...

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My Lieutenant, my Lieutenant, stop, quickly! You have large spots of ice on your cheeks.

Narrator : -- The soldier with the wooden leg takes a fistful of snow and rubs Poncelet's cheeks vigorously.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I hadn't felt anything. ... Thank you. ... Oh! It hurts. My blood is beginning to circulate again. My cheek is on fire.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- Rub your cheeks regularly. They are now prone to freeze from now on. In particular, do not go near a fire, gangrene could set in. I've seen soldiers who, to restart the circulation in their frozen backs, went too near the fire. The fire burned them without their realizing it, and rot did the rest.

Death (*with an air of discouragement*) : -- I don't look favourably on this incipient friendship. ... Brotherhood is my greatest enemy, worse still than memory and imagination, because it strikes many more people on the battlefields. ... Brotherhood is the last rampart, the last safety net; afterwards, nothing but the abandonment, the withdrawal of gaze. It's always a long siege that I have to bear against brotherhood and friendship ... and I am often beaten.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- In which battle did you lose your leg?

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- It's so stupid. It didn't happen during a battle. After entering Witebsk, we were exhausted by the long march and the constant skirmishes. You will probably recall that we had to quickly rebuild what the Russians, as usual, had destroyed when leaving the city. Trying to repair the winch of a mill, we miscalculated and one of the supporting beams fell on my leg. They made me drink a little rum and our surgeon, monsieur Larrey, amputated my leg. Ever since, I limp along as best I can on this stick of wood.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I think you are very courageous.

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- I was lucky. One of my buddies lost both legs in the accident. He died from the of infection some days later.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Does your stump hurt?

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- I still feel as though I have two legs. But my amputated leg is like a phantom leg. Sometimes a good, sometimes a bad phantom.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- How so?

Soldier with the wooden leg : -- My good phantom leg allows me to move my stick of wood, to walk, to stand up. It doesn't hurt me. But the bad one is unbearable. Sometimes, at night, when I take off my wooden leg to sleep, the bad one develops piercing pains. Then I feel as

though my phantom toes are scrunched up in spasms. Even pains that I had not felt for years suddenly come back to haunt me. About ten years ago, I had an ingrown nail which became infected and caused severe pain . Can you believe it? My phantom leg remembers it. Try to work out what's happening. It has a phenomenal memory. Meanwhile, my normal leg goes about its everyday business, with no memories of good or bad times. ... I really don't understand it.

Narrator : -- Poncelet loses himself in thought again. The column marches on steadily and passes near a snow-covered conifer wood. Two peasants approach and one of them speaks to a Cossack while pointing at Poncelet.

Peasant : -- Sell us that prisoner for ten rubles. He's not worth more, he's so skinny. He's talking to himself. It must annoy you.

Narrator : -- The peasant hands the Cossacks some coins.

Second Cossack : -- No, take the one with the wooden leg instead. He's slowing the column. Keep your rubles, you can have him.

Narrator : -- The peasants leave with the soldier with the wooden leg who struggles and tries to escape. They disappear into the skirt of the wood. After a moment, horrible screams are heard which slowly die out.

*While the narrator speaks, one hears the screams of the soldier with the wooden leg who is beaten to death with staves and shovels.*

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*shaken abruptly from his cogitations by the screams*) : -- What's happening? What are those horrible screams? Someone is being tortured! Help!

Second Cossack (*approaching Poncelet*) : -- Those screams could have been yours. The peasants wanted to take you. I suggested they take your comrade with the wooden leg. At the skirt of the wood, they put his head on a block and crushed it with clubs, shovels and cudgels.

Narrator : -- Poncelet tries to go to the skirt of the wood, but the Cossack holds him back.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*agitated, aggressive*) : -- Oh my God! No! This can't happen. I was just talking to him. ... Why didn't you protect him? ... It's your duty to take us to Saratov. He walked without stopping on despite of his pain. ... Will the horrors never cease? ... But why? Why?

Second Cossack : -- These peasants know perfectly well that, on the Czar's orders, they would get a ducat for delivering a prisoner safe and sound into the hands of the civil authorities. But they prefer to give us some rubles to buy a prisoner and kill him.

Narrator : --Poncelet continues walking alone, talking aloud to himself.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*talking to himself, as if reciting*) : -- Men are forbidden to kill their fellow-creatures and this act will be punished, ... unless carried out by large companies at the sound of a trumpet. ...(*Looking around him.*) There are, however, no large companies, here, on these endless steppes. The trumpets are mute. We are defenceless prisoners. ... (*He weeps.*) ... No one weeps the death of others on a battlefield. But here, ...(*looking around him*) there is no battle, there are only dying men in motion. It's naked horror in a blinding immensity. (*A long sob. And suddenly he cries out*) And why, why him? ... (*Addressing the Cossack, yelling at the top of his lungs*) Why did you save my life?

Second Cossack (*approaching Poncelet again*) : -- You are an officer, Sir. My mission is to deliver you to the prison of Saratov. He was after all just a poor wounded soldier who was going to die anyway, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow morning. The dying man, the wounded, is no longer a man. We may walk past them without qualm. You should know that, Sir.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*talking to himself*) : -- That's why the ultimate horror does not affect the living, but only those about to die. Oh my God!

Narrator : -- Death approaches Poncelet.

Death (*approaching Poncelet, speaking in a didactic tone*) : -- Pity is a sort of rust which attacks the soul. ... From now on, he is mine. ... **Evil** has dealt him a mortal blow.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*not having heard Death, very sad*) : -- What horrors! I am drowning in horror. My poor, poor comrade with the wooden leg. So courageous! ... (*Then a bit more briskly, after some moments of reflection.*) Colonel Bouvier, ... yes, (*hesitating*) he told me ... that the only cure for despair is exercise and that, ... in a real soldier, we find neither regret nor pity, only goodness. My comrade with the wooden leg was a real soldier. He never complained, he was good.

Death (*in a tone of incantation, slowly and pensively*) : -- Regret is a kind of rust which gnaws at the strength of the soul like acid corroding metal. ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*solemnly*) : -- Adieu, my courageous comrade, rest in peace. ... I will remember your warm smile. Your bad phantom leg won't cause you suffering any longer. ...

My memory of you will make me live and you will live in me.

Narrator : -- The prisoners advance on the icy roads. Day falls, night rises. The march goes on. Poncelet talks to himself. He exercises his memory reciting the beginning of Genesis. Wolves howl. The wind whistles.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Memory, my sweet companion, come and keep me company. ... You know I don't want to die yet. ... I felt death's temptation, but resisted it. Help me to live. We will walk together for some time, you and me. What story will you tell me today ? Talk to me. *(In a slow recitative tone as if memory were reciting to him the catechism)* « In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light.... » *(Pensively, very slowly, changing tone as if he and not the memory resumed the dialogue.)* There was light, ... there is light, ... there will be light. ... Can we imagine a world without light ? Wasn't Alexander Pope who wrote

« Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night,  
God said : 'Let Newton be',  
And all was light. »

Yes, it is true, *(smiling)* Newton was the happiest of men, because, ... **just once** man was

allowed to establish the system of the world. (*Abrupt change of tone : meditative.*) After that what would shall I be able to do? What can I accomplish?

Narrator : -- The column stops. The prisoners make a feeble campfire. They lie down close to each other. The Cossacks patrol around the group. Some murmuring voices are heard that slowly vanish into the whistling of the wind and the howling of wolves.

*The whistling of the wind, the howling of wolves, some moans and groans are heard.*

## INTERMISSION

### Act II

#### Scene 1

Narrator : -- After five months of marching, Poncelet finally arrives at Saratov prison on the banks of the Volga. He is taken to his cell and, upon entering it, falls into a deep coma from which he only emerges after two weeks, his mind completely exhausted and his body nothing but skin and bones. Two officers share the same cell, Lieutenant Jean Rémy and Captain Louis de Salvailles, former students of the École Polytechnique whom Poncelet had known in Paris.

Jean Remy : -- He's in a healing sleep at last. These last two weeks, I often thought we were going to lose him. Since yesterday, he looks better. He woke up a little while ago and had some soup.

Louis de Salvailles : -- The fever has left him. Let's keep this piece of bread for him. He must eat to build up his strength.

Jean Remy : -- I still can't believe it. Five months of marching, five months of the worst

privations, beatings, insults. How can he still be alive? It's unbelievable. A real miracle.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Remember in France he had to interrupt his studies on several occasions because of his health. It was the only thing which could stop him, he killed himself studying.

Jean Remy : -- We, who have never been sick, wouldn't have have survived those five months.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Yes, you're right. What luck to find our old Russian friend at the Smolensk headquarters! Did you notice that Dimitri recognised us immediately amongst the other prisoners.

Jean Remy : -- And at that time, our luck was in as he was going to join his brother in Baku and offered us a lift from Smolensk to Saratov in the sleigh. The leagues of snow sped by, the regular change of horses, each pair more dashing than the next, and there we were, sitting comfortably under the rugs, chatting with Dimitri about the future of our respective countries. To see these long lines of prisoners was a heartrending sight, but what could we do?

Louis de Salvailles : -- Join the poor devils and die?

Jean Remy : -- Or land in this prison, ... alive, ... to better await death?

Louis de Salvailles : -- Or share with them the gourmet extravagances which Dimitri had piled into the sleigh, vodka and caviar ... these would have killed them more certainly than the cold? Neither caviar, nor vodka are recommended for starving men.

Jean Remy : -- You can be so cynical! Still we couldn't pile them all into the berlin.

Louis de Salvailles : -- You know, I think that Jean-Victor would have refused Dimitri's offer.

He has a sense of duty and patriotism which is rather ...prickly.

Jean Remy (*forcefully*) : -- Honor! ... Family! ... Fatherland! ...Work! ... Equity! Litanies which are sacred for **to** him. ... In spite of everything, I like him. A bit boring and moralizing, but...

Louis de Salvailles (*interrupting Jean Remy, looking at Poncelet and approaching him*) : -- Look, he is restless. He's talking in his sleep. ... What's he saying?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*seized with terror, shivering*) : -- Oh! I'm so cold. ... It hurts all over. My nose, my nose has fallen off (*he touches his nose and rubs it*). My feet are gone (*he moves his legs*). But we have to walk, yes, walk, carry on walking and never stop. ... The wolves are there. Quickly, quickly, we have to set out again. ... I can't move anymore, they are getting closer. I can't get up anymore. ... We have to walk, walk, walk without stopping. The wolves, the wolves are there.

Louis de Salvailles (*shaking Poncelet*) : -- No, there are no wolves here. Wake up, wake up, Jean-Victor, you are dreaming. Another of those terrible nightmares. Wake up.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*waking up, he sees his friends, vehemently and despairingly*) : Oh! My friends, you are here. How good to see you. ... Rest, forgetfulness, ... never more to awaken with the smell of rotten flesh, ... of burnt flesh, ... of tortured flesh in my nostrils. In my dreams, I walk, walk, walk for ever. ...And now, when I walk only in my dreams, ... anguish tortures my stomach. Why am I still alive? What right do I have to be alive? Death has walked by my side everyday, why didn't she take me? What life am I being lent in exchange? A life of nightmarish memories, a life of daydreams. There will always be a tunnel of dust in all my summers, those endless marches in all my dreams, those dead horses in all my joys, ...(*in an infinitely sad voice*) and this companion with a skull smashed by pickaxes and shovels in all my awakenings.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Come on, get up, look at the April sun pointing which points its nose at the Volga. Look at these heavy ships, charged with the rich tributes from Georgia, Persia and the Caspian sea furrowing the greatest of the rivers of Europe. Your fever has gone. The infections caused by chilblains have gone. There is nothing that sun and sleep won't cure. Even your nightmares will dwindle with time, and ... your memories will let you sleep.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Yes, you are right. They are only nightmares. I am alive again. The sap of the summer sun flows in my veins. The horror of this war shrivels like a scrap of paper on fire. I finally feel a healing compassion for all my poor dead comrades. ... (*Sadly.*) When the suffering and the horror of the war overwhelmed me, nothing, ... but nothing touched me. ... One day last summer, when it was 40 degrees, my servant made me a cup of coffee and I sat in the shade of a tree. A naked corpse lay there. Notice, I say 'a naked corpse' when it was in reality one of our dead soldiers, (*more and more vehemently*) one of our comrades, one of my comrades, Luc-Henri. My comrade Luc-Henri, do you understand?

Jean Remy : -- Calm down, Jean-Victor. Your cries won't bring him back to life.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*trying to have them understand the horror*) : -- In my eyes, he was nothing but a corpse. ... I was insensible to all emotion, ... I only was capable of one thought : 'Good thing that this corpse hasn't started to rot or I would have had to take my coffee in the burning sun and not in this cooling shade.' Now, ... (*big sigh*) I have the leisure to feel guilty for being alive. Even my guilt is a breath of life, ... a breath that gives me life, ... life through the death of somebody else, life through the death of Luc-Henri, life through the death of my courageous comrade with the wooden leg.

Louis de Salvailles (*pensively*) : -- Yes, these are details and details that haunt our memories.

Great moments are rare. Danger was the only thing that kept me alive, spice in the insipidity of generalized degradation.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- During the whole campaign, I only felt in danger three times: Under the walls of Smolensk, then while building the bridges on the Dniepr under enemy fire, and finally, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November, when I fell under the blows of the enemy.

Jean Remy : -- It's only *a posteriori* that we reconstruct these dangers. We're not really aware of them in the thick of action.

Louis de Salvailles : -- At nightfall, alone in the dark, one relives the day in spite of oneself and begins to tremble with retrospective fear, imagining alternatives each more horrible than the other.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Anguish and terror have no place on the battlefield ...

Jean Remy : -- That's why heroism is possible, you don't think on the battlefield, you don't reflect. ...

Louis de Salvailles : -- What will we do until this war ends? Strolls in the streets of Saratov have had little attraction for me. There are only coarse peasant women and some uncouth squires who are also nothing but peasants as well.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*surprised*) : -- Ah! Are we free to walk in the streets of Saratov, to go on the banks of the Volga?

*The sounds of prison and the street are heard.*

Jean Remy (*taking his time*) : -- Our prison lies inside another prison. The uncultivated steppes and the Volga surround Saratov. Escape is impossible.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Dimitri told us that Napoleon left the Grande-Armée at the beginning of December and went back to Paris to raise another army.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I'm sure that Napoleon will come soon to open the doors of our prison.

Jean Remy : -- Well, while waiting for that joyful deliverance, what can we do? Louis and I could become tutors of Russian children. Undoubtedly, you'll be asked too. Your reputation has already passed beyond the walls of this prison. Two Russian squires have offered us the hospitality of their chateau for the duration of the war in exchange for *some courses of* mathematics and physics lessons for their sons.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Hospitality, even if only that of a Russian chateau, is better than what this prison offers!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*briskly*) : You refused, of course.

Jean Remy : -- Why? ... No. ... We said that that we would think it over and would give them an answer soon.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- It's out of the question.

Louis de Salvailles : -- There you go, at full gallop on your big patriotic horses. What's wrong with furnishing the brains of some Russians whippersnappers who could then come to study in Paris? The prospective of some extra coins for our poor France weakened by all these ridiculous wars. It was Napoleon who got us into this mess.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Oh!

Jean Remy (*cutting in quickly*) : -- Louis, please, don't criticize Napoleon in front of our friend, don't criticize his idol. We're not going to quarrel.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*calming down after a while, a great sigh*) : -- I have a proposition. Because of the war, you couldn't finish your studies at the École Polytechnique. Why don't I become your tutor? ...Honor would be saved. ... You could take your exams, as soon as you return to Paris, without needing any preparatory courses.

Jean Remy : -- But we don't have blackboards to write on.

Louis de Salvailles : -- No chalk, no notebooks, no ink.

Jean Remy : -- No books, no precision instruments.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- But ...you have your heads! Don't you? The panels of this door will serve as blackboards (*indicating the door that gives out on the corridor*), for chalk, we'll use bits of coal. We'll save some of our earnings each month and we'll buy paper to make copy-books on which I will write the lessons. ...I can make the ink myself.

Louis de Salvailles : -- But books, what will we do without books?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I'll do everything again : the elements of mathematics, of algebra, of geometry, of trigonometry. I'll write down my notes in the notebooks ... and so you will have your books.

Jean Remy : -- I feel as though I have forgotten everything.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- In my case, I know I have. Suffering and fever have dug tunnels and labyrinths into my brain. However, I still remember some of the teachings of Monge, who

was my favorite professor. I've forgotten details, but not the fundamental and general principles. I'll get you sufficiently prepared to successfully pass your exams. I will start work right away. As soon as a notebook is ready, I'll pass it on to you. You'll study it and I will answer your questions.

Jean Remy : -- There are other officers in this prison who would like to study. Their education was interrupted by the campaigns of Egypt, Spain, Germany and Italy. France has been waging war so long. We could lend them *these* notebooks afterwards.

Louis de Salvailles (*handing over a notebook to Poncelet*) : -- You can begin to write in this notebook while we go for a walk. Perhaps we can convince some peasant girls to join us in the your mathematics lessons.

Narrator : -- They call the guard, who opens the door for them. They both leave. Death takes advantage to sneak in.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*speaking to Death, slowly*) : -- I've forgotten everything. I have to start from the very beginning. I showed a confidence, in front of Louis and Jean, that I didn't feel. Where shall I begin?

Death : -- Don't count on me for help. (*Aside.*) How beautiful he is, aquiver with mental energy. He eludes me time and again. My only and final hope is that he will die of an apoplectic fit when he makes a mistake in his theorems.

Narrator : -- Poncelet begins to write and to fill the notebooks. Louis and Jean spend days and nights learning the mathematics they needed to finish their studies. The notebooks pile up on a corner of the table. They study, take notes, solve problems suggested by Poncelet. Then one day :

Louis de Salvailles (*immediate link, untimely*) : -- Jean-Victor, stop. My brain is already saturated. Enough is enough.

Jean Remy : -- We'll pass our exams with high marks. We are better prepared than if we had stayed in Paris.

Louis de Salvailles : -- You should be proud of yourself...

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I could now tell you about my ideas on projective geometry which I had during the long months of the forced march.

Jean Remy : -- Agreed, but for the moment we have to rest a bit and breath some fresh air. You should come with us.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- No, no, maybe later.

Narrator : -- Louis de Salvaille et Jean Remy leave the cell. Death leafs through some notebooks on the table.

Death : -- Trigonometry. Algebra. He's unstoppable. What energy! Days and nights follow one another and he, like a mother bird who endlessly regurgitates food to feed its young, pulls out complete courses from his brain.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*slowly, deliberately*) : -- Now then, I must put in order the ideas that I had on the long march. ... Let's see. The properties of a figure which are invariant under certain transformations are not modified when the figure takes a limiting position. ... That's right. ...Let's take two lines. In general position these lines meet in one point P. This is clear. But let us move these lines by imperceptible degrees until they become parallel. At this moment, they will take a limiting position.

Narrator : -- He draws two lines that meet at a point, P. Then he moves them apart by imperceptible degrees until they become parallel. Death is taking notes.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- The Point P has vanished.

Death : -- A fainting point? Ha! Ha! No, don't get angry, I know one should say a vanishing point, but I like to tease you.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Here is another example. ... Line D cuts a circle at two two different points, x and y, in general position, but in the limiting position, which is obtained by degrees by slowly displacing the line out of the circle, the two points coincide. One obtains a double point, a 'thick' point. Hence in a limiting position, the line is tangent to the circle. ... That's it, here is my principle. I will call it the 'Principle of continuity'. All that is true for the general position of a figure remains true for the limiting position. Thus, I deduce that two lines always meet in a point.

Death (*scandalized*) : -- Think a minute before uttering such a nonsense. Two parallel lines will never meet. Even Euclid knew that.

Narrator : -- Louis de Salvailles returns from his walk. Silently, he sits down and takes notes.

Poncelet continues his demonstration and ignores the irritating interruptions from Death.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- This will be the foundation of projective geometry. Projective geometry is **not** Euclidean. Two parallel lines meet, but at a point at infinity. So there are no parallel lines in projective geometry. That's it! Finally I have captured that point at infinity which endlessly vanished in front of me when I was walking through through the icy steppes. Look, the same thing happens with two planes which, in general position, meet in a line. In a

limiting position, these planes should still meet and what do I have?

Death : -- Still a line?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Yes, but a line at infinity. ... That's the answer to the question I raised : The horizon is a line. Everything falls into place. Marvelous.

Death : -- What enthusiasm! I'd like to be able to say : Everything falls in time.

Narrator : -- Louis de Salvailles exits silently. Poncelet takes a plate and, using a candle, projects its shadow onto one of the room's walls.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Yes, ... the points at infinity. An intuition of Kepler's genius, thanks to which we may verify that the circle, the ellipse, the parabola and the hyperbola may be obtained one from each other. Look, if I place my candle behind the plate and look at its projection on the wall, I obtain an ellipse. If I displace the candle in relation to the plate, like this, I obtain a parabola, ... but notice, the parabola is nothing more than an ellipse with a point at infinity. By displacing the candle differently, one can also obtain a hyperbola. ... This means that by central projections and their compositions I can obtain all the conics from a circle. In projective geometry, there is only one conic, since we can obtain one from another by central projection or composition of central projections. ... But, that's it! It's the way to harmonize all the points of view. What I was looking for. Marvelous!

Narrator : -- Louis de Salvailles and Jean Remy come running into the room.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Jean-Victor, Jean-Victor! ... We are leaving.

Jean Remy : -- Do you understand? We are free.

Narrator : -- Poncelet does not hear them.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- So projective geometry is the framework that allows one to understand Képler's assertion. The circle, the ellipse, the parabola and the hyperbola are one and the same conic.

Jean Remy : -- Jean-Victor, listen, I'm telling you we're free.

Louis de Salvailles : -- We just learned that on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, the powers allied against France signed the Treaty of Paris. The prison authorities received confirmation today of the ratification of peace.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*exalted*) : -- And I, I'm telling you that in projective geometry there is only one conic. Wars will start and stop again and again, we will die. But in projective geometry, there will never be but one conic.

Narrator : -- Meanwhile Death has put on a travelling coat and a hat. She carries a wooden scythe as a pilgrim's stick.

Death : -- I see years of thin cows on the horizon. There won't be any lost fireflies to capture on the battlefields. (*Sadly and slowly*) Nothing's working any more.

Jean Remy : -- We have the authorization to leave right now.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Napoleon has been banished to the Island of Elba.

Jean Remy : -- We are at peace with the whole world. The Shorn is finally in chains.

*(Noticing the lack of enthusiasm of Poncelet)* Jean-Victor! How funereal you are!

Jean-Victor Poncelet *(more and more vehemently)* : -- You announce me the capitulation of Napoleon and you want me to rejoice? We have lost an empire and you want me to rejoice? France is humiliated and you want me still to rejoice? What's the matter with you, are you mad?

Louis de Salvailles : -- Yes, my friend, mad with liberty, we are mad with liberty. Do you understand? Paris and its cafes belong to us.

Jean Remy : -- Paris and its elegant beauties.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Paris and its restaurants packed with people.

Jean Remy : -- We are leaving this very evening as soon as we have said good-bye to our laughing peasant girls. Pack your bags. You only have an hour left.

Narrator : -- Louis de Salvailles and Jean Remy prepare their meagre baggage with enthusiasm. Jean-Victor Poncelet sits on his bed.

Jean-Victor Poncelet *(dazed, surprised)* : But ... what should I do? I can't leave yet. I haven't finish developing my ideas on projective geometry.

Jean Remy : -- Dimitri's berlin won't be at our disposal on the way back. What a shame!

Louis de Salvailles *(also preparing his meager baggage)* : We'll miss the caviar and the vodka.

Jean-Victor Poncelet *(continuing his idea)* : -- Let's finish this notebook at least, four days at

the most. ...Why such a hurried departure?

Louis de Salvailles : -- Jean-Victor, you lack perspective although you speak of it endlessly.  
Be sensible.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*slowly*) : -- You are probably right. It's all so sudden. ... I'm very happy to see my dear homeland again, my family, my friends. But ...

Death : -- You wouldn't say he is overjoyed.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- The idea of leaving this room, ... this city with its long rows of wooden houses, ...these uncultivated steppes which surround it, ...this ever-changing Volga, is heartrending.

Death (*mockingly, slowly and very clearly*) : -- A succinct description of a perfect place favouring the blooming of geometric theories.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*talking to himself*) : -- In the middle of this new active life that awaits me, will I be able to pursue, as I did in the silence and solitude of exile, the studies which so sweetened its bitterness and have consequently become so dear to me? ... I feel a deep emotion and keen apprehension at the thought of abandoning this ascetic life. ...(*Then speaking to his friends.*) Leave, my friends. I have to put my manuscripts in order. (*The friends try to protest.*) No! Don't insist ... I'll make my way home alone, ... in a day or two.

Louis de Salvailles : -- Good bye, then. We'll meet again in France.

Jean Remy : -- Good bye my friend. God keep you.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- May God keep you safe, my dear friends.

Narrator : -- Poncelet and death sit down, face to face, and look at each other.

Death : -- We've travelled together for a long time. (*Pensively.*) One could say that, by my side, you have learned to live. I will leave you now, a long life awaits you, a long bureaucratic life. ... But I will return. I will return to take you one day. And that time, you will follow me.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Eighteen months. Eighteen months where, bit by bit, I succeeded in eluding my sufferings and those of my country through study and discovery. Eighteen months where, finally, I started enjoying my captivity. Eighteen months in which my only worries were to develop these ideas springing from my brain. ... And, yes, I realize, eighteen months of happiness and richness. ... But, ... I must organize these ideas so that the world learns about this new geometry. ... Down to work, then.

Narrator : -- Poncelet takes a pen and, after a few moments, begins to put down on paper the main lines of his preface, while reading aloud.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*as if reading, slowly while writing*) : -- My title will be : Treatise on the projective properties of figures. ... This work is the result of researches which I undertook, in the spring of 1813, in Russian prisons : deprived of any kind of book or help, distracted by my misfortunes and those of my homeland, I could not initially give them the desired perfection. However I had already found at that time the fundamental theorems of my work, that is to say, the principles on the central projection of figures in general and conic sections in particular, ...

Narrator : -- Silence sets in. Death resumes her journey. Poncelet remains seated, pensive and silent. Then, gathering his manuscripts and baggage, he sets out on the return road, retracing in a berlin, one by one, all the leagues he had travelled on foot.

## Scene 2

Narrator (*in an intimate tone, slowly*) : -- Back in France, Poncelet had a long and fruitful career. But today Death had returned just as she had promised. At seventy nine, the shell of eternity is thin and frail. Death, as a cat ready to pounce, keeps an eye on him. ... This time, he won't get away. ... Madame Poncelet rewinds the grandfather clock. She is exhausted but smiling although infinitely sad. It's evening.

Madame Poncelet : -- Did you sleep well, my dear friend? How do you feel?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Fine, fine. That nap rejuvenated me. I'd like a glass of wine, some biscuits and some cheese. Come sit by me and let's drink a glass together.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet leaves the room and returns shortly afterwards with a plate of biscuits, some cheese and a carafe of wine. She pours two glasses of wine.

Madame Poncelet : -- While straightening the shelves in your library as you requested, I found some poems in your handwriting. Are they yours?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Oh! my sweet friend, they are youthful indiscretions. Burn them right away.

Madame Poncelet : -- I don't agree, but if you insist ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- You cancelled your salon today under the pretext that it would have tired me. Please, continue with your receptions on Sundays and Wednesdays as before. You should carry on as usual. Promise me that you will receive next Wednesday. You see, I feel much better. Some friends could come to visit me in my room. You could invite Arago, Chasles and Dupin. I'd so much like to see them one last time.

Madame Poncelet : -- Don't talk like that. It distresses me.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Shortly before his death in 1813, Lagrange pronounced these words which fit me like a glove : 'Death is but the absolute repose of the body. I desire to die, but my wife doesn't. At moments like these, I'd prefer a wife who was less good, less eager to rebuild my strength, who would let me to pass away peacefully. I have finished up my career. I have obtained a certain celebrity. I haven't hated anyone. I have not done evil and it's time to finish, but my wife doesn't want it.'

Death (*shrugging her shoulders*) : -- How edifying!

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Lagrange and I, we *have* found the sweetness of a companion near the end of our lives. Their young faces lit up our declining years. I could never describe the happiness that you have given me. Your sweetness, your smile, your constant attention gave me the desire to continue to work, to live, to breathe. Your curiosity, your intelligence have stimulated me. You have reworked my manuscripts with care and meticulousness. You have been my collaborator. I would have never published so much without your companionship *of at* each moment. You were always there to ease my sufferings. But now, I often feel a great fatigue.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet is resigned, but she smiles through tears which she holds back with more and more difficulty.

Madame Poncelet : -- I prepared a chicken broth to build up your strength. Let's have a cup together. Then, I could reread the notes which you dictated to me yesterday evening. ... It's normal, my friend, to feel tired during this long month of December, so dark and sad.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Don't be sad, my dear friend. I regret nothing except to know that I hurt you.

Madame Poncelet (*with more energy*) : -- So on Wednesday I will invite Chasles, Arago and Dupin, perhaps Becquerel and Hermite. Not Cauchy, he's too prudish. I will never forgive him the reservations he formulated on your geometry.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- My sweet friend, that happened more than forty years ago.

Madame Poncelet : -- He accused you of lacking rigor.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I believe that Cauchy confused rigor and formalism. I tried to base projective geometry on two principles : that of continuity and that of duality. It's a very rigorous attitude. But I didn't express myself with all the formalism so dear to Cauchy.

Madame Poncelet : -- Moreover, he is more of a royalist than all the kings of the planet put together. I can tell you in confidence, I don't much like Monsieur Cauchy.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*smiling tenderly*) : -- I suspected that much, my tender friend. Very well! We won't invite him.

Madame Poncelet : -- I would like a beautiful evening of which only the muffled echoes will reach you. I will serve a guinea-fowl consommé and will have a bowl sent into you. You used to enjoy it.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Keep me a bit of the white meat of this guinea-fowl.

Madame Poncelet : -- With pleasure, my dear friend.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I am going to rest a while.

Madame Poncelet (*kissing him in the forehead*) : -- I'll use the time to reread some notes.

Sleep well, I wish you sweet dreams.

Death : -- Listen to them, both of them, cooing like turtledoves. They think they have all life before them. There is more than a quarter of a century between them and in less than a month, they will have been married a quarter of a century. Enough. However, this is not the way I imagined their union. ... I remember that he sent a letter to Marshal Soult, Minister of state in the War department, asking for permission to marry. (*Mockingly and taking the public as witness.*) 'Desiring to enter into the bonds of matrimony with Mademoiselle Louise-Palmyre Gaudin, of full age, domiciled in Paris, I have the honor to send you, included herein, the documents which prove that she fulfils the conditions of morality and fortune (*Death underlines this fact by insisting and raising the index finger*) required by law, begging you the necessary authorization in my position of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Corps of Engineers, to contract this union in the near future. Please, be so good , etc., etc.' After such a beginning I thought that this would be a marriage of convenience. But no! My judgement failed me completely. After the consummation of this marriage, Jean-Victor, at the peak of happiness, redoubled his activity. He had wings. His health seemed to improve. ... Sometimes marriage speeds the end. In this case, it was the opposite. One can never predict the outcome of these stories of the heart.

Narrator : -- During Death`s long monologue, Madame Poncelet sits on a sofa, near the window and reads handwritten notes on the table. The general dozes lightly. Between wakefulness and sleep, he speaks aloud unaware that he is doing so.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*speaks, raving gently, uttering unrelated sentences* : -- Days are so long and life is so short. ... The moon warmed only my thoughts on the icy steppes. The only unconquered general ... is death.

Death (*talking to herself*) : -- Every man thinks that all men are mortal, except himself.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*as if awakening and speaking to his wife*) : -- My dear friend, are you there? Place your hand on my forehead. It's so cool and soft.

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet comes over and puts her hand on the burning forehead of her husband, while sitting down on a chair beside the bed. A bit later, she removes her hand and picks up a book. She remains sitting on the chair, silent and meditative. ... She does not hear the conversation nnnnn between Death and Poncelet.

Death (*in a scolding tone*) : -- Don't come tell me that death is something new to you.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I don't feel like being scolded on my deathbed! Life is too short to indulge in the luxury of thinking about you. ... I was saying to myself ... if I could reach the top of that tree, war would no longer exist. I could escape that tunnel of dust and look at the butterfly on the highest branch for the duration of one instant, an instant that I would render eternal. ... Well, ... today ... it's the same thing, if I could escape from you, from this room and walk to the Luxembourg Gardens, you would cease to exist. ... I could leave for the duration of an instant and melt into the radiance of the Milky Way.

Death : -- I can't get used to the fact that men of today are still afraid of me. How is it possible that they have not managed to reconcile themselves to the evidence? They have a whole existence to prepare themselves. Why do they fear me and rejoice at a birth which, after all, is only the beginning of the road towards death? They make an enemy of me, an enemy that has to be fought as long as there is life. However, primitive man lived in harmony with death. ...

Primitive man was a sage who ignored himself.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Do you mean that life has no sense but for you, you who don't even exist. You are nothing but a condition of life that we relegate to the last moment. I know that I'm approaching that moment inexorably. But I am alone and alive. (*More vehement.*) I die living. You are but an illusion.

Death : -- You'll never understand anything. It's too late. ... Where did this conviction of the value of each moment come from? Do you remember?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- You weary me.

Death : -- It came from the fact that you knew that you were mortal, it came from the fact that you walk by my side day after day. Life did not carry you in its swirl, because I was there, without respite, your white companion of the icy steppes. ... Then, life took the upper hand. ... It sneaked in a series of detours, increasingly conscious, taking you away from birth to bring you closer and closer to death.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*dispairing*) : -- All is nothing but illusion, all sinks into nothingness.

Death (*very sentimentously*) : -- He who does not live with his death does not live at all. Death becomes the great initiator of life. The creative force. It was not until Saratov, in prison, that you understood these truths. Then the bureaucratic whirlwind obsessed you. After your release from prison, you became a simple copyist of your erstwhile ideas.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- What a depressing speech! You speak as if there were nothing but you in this life. You talk too much, leave me alone!

Death : -- Don't be angry! You haven't yet answered all my questions. Today, after a life spent in admiring one of the bloodiest despots in history, are you sorry? Have you added at least some flats to the key of your admiration?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- No.

Death : --No?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I will never forget what Napoleon said to his brother Jerome, then in Germany : 'What people want is that those individuals who are not nobles by birth, but who have talent, have an equal right to our consideration and to employment, that all kind of bondage and intermediary ties between the sovereign and the lowest class of the nation be entirely abolished.' Almost all over Europe, one could see the development of civil equality, the abolition of feudal privileges. From then on, a man with talent could be promoted, regardless of his birth.

Death : -- You are incorrigible. Do you know what Napoleon told Metternich a few months after the retreat from Moscow?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I was a prisoner in Saratoff at that time, as you very well know.

Death : -- While you were languishing in your prison, Napoleon was saying to Metternich 'A man like me is not concerned with the death of a few million men.' What more is there to say?

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- (*Reasonably*) I remember a soldier who was trying to remove the clothes from his officer whom he thought dead. The officer said to him : 'Comrade, I'm not dead yet.' 'Well then, sir! I will wait a few moments.' I would ask you to treat me with as

much decency. (*Suddenly angry*) Leave me alone ... and stop asking questions, I want to rest. Leave!

Death (*continuing his idea*) : -- It is logical that Napoleon should be my hero, but that he should be the hero of men he sent to their deaths! Well, after all, I shouldn't be surprised, I've known for a long time that men are not rational.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*once again lost in his memories, meditative, longingly*) : -- Odd as it may seem, it was very peaceful. ... Far from the political crises, from bombardments. I could think continuously about projective geometry, about my principle of continuity. I listen to the Milky Way talking about cosmology. ... How attractive this sidereal world appears to me. ... Nearing the end of my long life, I find it as mysterious as ever. ... Every discovery brings others even more marvelous and more complex. I could develop an idea, follow it through its meanderings with no need to put it on a shelf, waiting to snatch a few minutes from bureaucracy, from promotion trips, from research reports, from meetings in the Academy, from priority fights over a discovery. I often wished to return to the secret garden of my prison in Saratov. O Saratov, envelop me, a last time, in the wonder of discovery.

*The twelve strokes of midnight and then the tick-tock of the clock are heard.*

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet rises from her chair near the bed. She changes the date of the calendar. It's the 23d of December 1867. She takes some steps across the room before returning to her arm-chair near the window, with a book.

Death : -- He is lost, like a small child. He is no longer on his deathbed. He relives Saratov. ... The happiest time of his life was spent in prison. ... What irony. His genius took flight there. Sadly ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*speaks to Death, but as in a dream*) : -- Why are you looking at me in that way?

Death (*irritated, but tenderly*) : -- For an instant, you pouted in the way that made me incandescent with fury when you were strolling through the icy steppes.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Don't you put any value on my long life since Saratov?

Death : -- Oh! yes, I know. You have been awarded numerous decorations. But what is a decoration, other than a means to reduce to silence an anthill of small vanities?

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*suddenly furious, enumerates everything pellmell while searching for ideas, coming back to life*) : -- Really, you do exaggerate. I have never run after decorations. I was made a Great-Officer of the Legion d'Honneur without asking for it, and it was at the end of my career. Many others, friends of power, received this distinction before me.

Death : -- There, you see! In spite of yourself, regrets are showing their ugly little heads. Vanity! Vanity!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*still furious*) : --\_Am I not one of the main founders of modern geometry, the father of industrial mechanics, member of the Academy of Sciences. I have been commander of the École Polytechnique, representative of the people to the Constituent Assembly of the Second Republic in 1848. I had a chair in the Collège de France. I invented a mode of restoration of variable counterweight lift bridges and zinc roofing and the stability of revetments and their foundations. I organized an introductory course for building factories. Have you forgotten that I wrote a report on machines and tools used in factories since the Bible and Homer? Two volumes of 1173 pages.

Death : -- What happened to your genius scattered in the midst of those didactic pages? Others could have undertaken that work of compilation. Why didn't you stay at Saratov to follow the twists and turns of your projective geometry? Humanity didn't need yet another bureaucrat..

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*raising his voice more and more while talking*) : -- And above all, I invented the new paddle-wheels that nearly doubled the economy of hydraulic power. Numerous French, Italian, English, Belgian and German industrialists installed the new hydraulic wheels in their factories. They were so successful that they were called : Poncelet wheels. Did you hear? Poncelet wheels!

Death : -- Oh! But, how angry our old general has become. He rides on his great parade horses. That revives him. He is regaining his youthful energy on his deathbed.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*still filled with emotion*) : -- None of this means anything to you? These are inventions that humanity will never need to grieve over. None of them has been transformed into weapons of destruction. Is that what you reproach me with? That's it, isn't it? I have not worked for you, for your destructive power, for your absolute rule on this earth.

Death : -- I know Jean-Victor Poncelet never did any harm. A right-wing republican who preferred injustice to disorder, a patriot who blindly followed a despot leading his country to the edge of the abyss, a man who gave his genius into the hands of bureaucracy, a man who is said to be humble and unselfish!

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*with a loud and furious voice, beside himself with anger, trying to get out of bed as though sleepwalking*) : -- But, ... I am humble and unselfish!

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet, surprised, hears these last words. The general comes to himself and notices the presence of his wife.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*suddenly calm, speaking to Madame Poncelet*) : -- I cried out, didn't I? I had a nightmare. I'm sorry!

Madame Poncelet (*trying to comfort him*) : -- My dear friend, what is happening to you? ... You have a fever. You're having bad dreams. I have never met anyone in my whole life so humble and modest about the magnitude of his work. You have worked without respite even during your illness, an indefatigable researcher, an enlightened politician. You deserve a rest, my dear friend. ... Remember your childhood at Saint-Avoid. Tell me again that beautiful legend about the founding of the benedictine abbey by saint Fridolin.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*anxious*) : -- My sweet friend, stay by my side. I don't want to slip back into that nightmarish sleep.

Madame Poncelet (*tenderly*) : -- Perhaps you would prefer to talk about that underground expedition to the vaults which had been excavated to exploit the lead mines, where at the age of ten, you led your playmates. They were all scared to death, except for you who already displayed your talents as a general.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I love to hear the melody of your voice on my last battlefield.

Madame Poncelet : -- One of your cousins was telling me the other day that, when you were eleven, you had saved your pocket money to buy a watch which you took apart and put together again ... and that after this exercise, it always worked perfectly. Not only did you have a mechanical talent, but you wanted to share it with your fellow men. You gave free courses in mechanics and geometry to the workers after hours. (*She watches with attention*

*and realizes that he doesn't hear her.) ... My dear friend. ... My dear friend, come back to me. ... You seem so far away. ... (Crescendo) I love you more than myself, stay by me, don't leave me. (Begging.) Come back, come back to me, ... (nearly in tears) you're taking the train, leaving me on the station platform. ...No, no, ...*

Narrator : -- Madame Poncelet takes her husband hand. She kneels down and rests her head on the bed. Poncelet no longer hears his wife. His voice is feverish, he expresses himself slowly and with difficulty.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- What a mess, all this lost time. Questions, questions hanging around like ghosts searching for answers which life doesn't give them. ... I hear a muffled sound. ... An earthquake? ... Is my soul trembling? ... It is the north wind, crossing the forests, sweeping up in its wake all the cold of the earth. Ten thousand bodies lie in their white shrouds. Roads are nothing more than frozen battlefields. ...The snow falls, falls, falls endlessly, for ever.

Death : -- When you were on the march, the glacial atmosphere kept an impression of your bodies, preparing your funeral statues.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- I knew that you were retracing every detail of my journey behind me, that you were picking up each small disappointment lost in the powder. You wanted to gnaw, to crunch my soul with my fleeting failings.

Death : -- You feared me. You wanted to bring your discoveries back to France and later, your precious documents.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Oh Saratov!

Death : -- Your tragedy was to leave the prison.

Jean-Victor Poncelet : -- Have I dreamt up this life after Saratov? I was never able to successfully conclude my researches.

Death : -- You have lived beyond decency. You have seen three revolutions, you have survived every imaginable political regime. But today, you will come with me. We will become one, together at last into nothingness, my superb young lieutenant.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*anxious*) : -- The Milky Way is the backbone that holds the night in the sky, that holds back the avalanche of the immense black ice field awaiting me.

Death (*watching Poncelet attentively*) : -- What gives life to the features of living men is not their souls. ... What give them their expression, ... is vanity, greed, passion, ... the guile of a vice on the look out ready to pounce, suffering. ... Only an hour after his death, does the real face of a man, the vestiges of the soul of a child, begin to spring from his mask.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*hesitating, as if in a dream, but not anxious*) : -- Perhaps I am already dead and this play is just that, nothing but a play? ... Have I dreamed this interminable life? ... Are we the stuff of which dreams are made?... (*Then, looking his wife one last time, smiling.*) Have I imagined your love, my tender and sweet friend? No. ... No. (*After a while and very slowly*) ... Am I still here? ... No, I walk, I walk unflinching toward a point at infinity, ... toward a luminous point at infinity.

Narrator : -- Poncelet looks around. He is calm. Then he places his hand over his eyes like a visor as if trying to see the point at infinity more clearly. Death and Madame Poncelet

disappear from his consciousness. He is alone. Suddenly, he rises, helped by the young lieutenant Poncelet who appears at this moment. The two leave the room and resume the march to Saratov amidst wind and storm. Leaning on each other, they advance into the snowy vastness.

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*slowly and solemnly*) : -- A luminous point at infinity. ... I walk towards it.

The young Poncelet (*slowly but with vitality*) : -- Conics are but one ...

Jean-Victor Poncelet (*very slowly*) : -- In this eternal projective world ... where death does not enter.

Narrator : -- The general and the lieutenant, leaning on each other, disappear into the distance en route towards that point at infinity that Death will never reach.

*An excerpt of 'Death and the Maiden' is heard. No sound, save the ticking of the clock. The ticking of the clock stops. Then beatings of the heart are heard, ever more slowly. Afterwards, nothing.*

**THE END**

Montréal, Aarhus, Lac Sauvage dans les Laurentides  
Septembre 2002 à août 2004

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