

## Agesilaus Santander (Second Version)

When I was born, it occurred to my parents that I might perhaps become a writer.<sup>1</sup> If that happened, it would be a good idea if people did not immediately notice I was a Jew. This is why they gave me two names in addition to my first name—eccentric names which showed neither that a Jew bore them, nor even that they were his first names. Forty years ago, it was impossible for parents to be more prescient. What they regarded as a remote possibility has come to pass. But the precautions that were supposed to combat fate were nullified by the very person they concerned most. Instead of making the names public with his works, he followed the Jewish custom of keeping them secret. Jews tell their children about a secret name only when the children reach maturity. Because this day can come more than once in a lifetime, and perhaps because even the secret name can remain the same and untransformed only for the pious, the man who is not pious may experience its transformation at a stroke with this new manhood. This was my situation. Thus, it remains the name that binds together all the forces of life and that is to be protected against outsiders.

But this name is by no means an enrichment of the person it designates. On the contrary, much of his image falls away when the name is heard. He loses, above all, the gift of appearing human. In the room I occupied in Berlin, even before that person had emerged fully armored and accounted for from my name, he had fixed his image to the wall: New Angel.<sup>2</sup> The Kaballah relates that, at every moment, God creates a whole host of angels, whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before His throne for a moment and sing His praises. The new angel presented himself as such before naming himself. I only fear that I had kept him excessively long from

his hymn. Aside from that, he has paid me back. By turning to his advantage the fact that I was born under the sign of Saturn—the planet of the slowest revolution, the star of hesitation and delay—he sent his feminine aspect after the masculine one reproduced in the picture, and did so by the most circuitous, most fatal detour, even though the two had once (while remaining unknown to each other) been such close neighbors.

He may have been unaware that in doing this he brought out the strength of the man against whom he was proceeding—namely, his ability to wait. Whenever this man encountered a woman who held him in thrall, he at once determined to lie in wait for her on her journey through life and to wait until she fell into his hands, ill, aged, and in ragged clothes. In short, nothing could overcome the man's patience. And its pinions resembled those of the angels: they needed but a few movements to hold him stationary in the face of the woman whom he was determined not to abandon.

But the angel resembles everything from which I have had to part: the people, and especially the things. He dwells in the things I no longer possess. He makes them transparent, and behind each of them appears the figure of the person for whom they are intended. This is why no one can surpass me when it comes to giving presents. Indeed, the angel may have been attracted by a person who gives but who goes away empty-handed himself. For he, too, has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions, and makes no attempt to fall upon whomever he has his eye on. He looks him steadily in the eye, for a long time, and then retreats—in a series of spasms, but inexorably. Why? To draw him after himself on that road to the future along which he came, and which he knows so well that he can traverse it without turning round and letting him whom he has chosen out of his sight. He wants happiness—that is to say, the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the new, the yet unborn is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived. This is why he has nothing new to hope for on any road other than the road home, when he takes a new person with him. Just like myself, for scarcely had I seen you the first time than I returned with you to where I had come from.

Ibiza, August 13, 1933

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### Notes

1. The two autobiographical texts entitled "Agesilaus Santander" have provoked much speculation. There is now general agreement that the title does not refer to the Spartan king Agesilaos II (444–360 B.C.), who is mentioned by Xenophon,