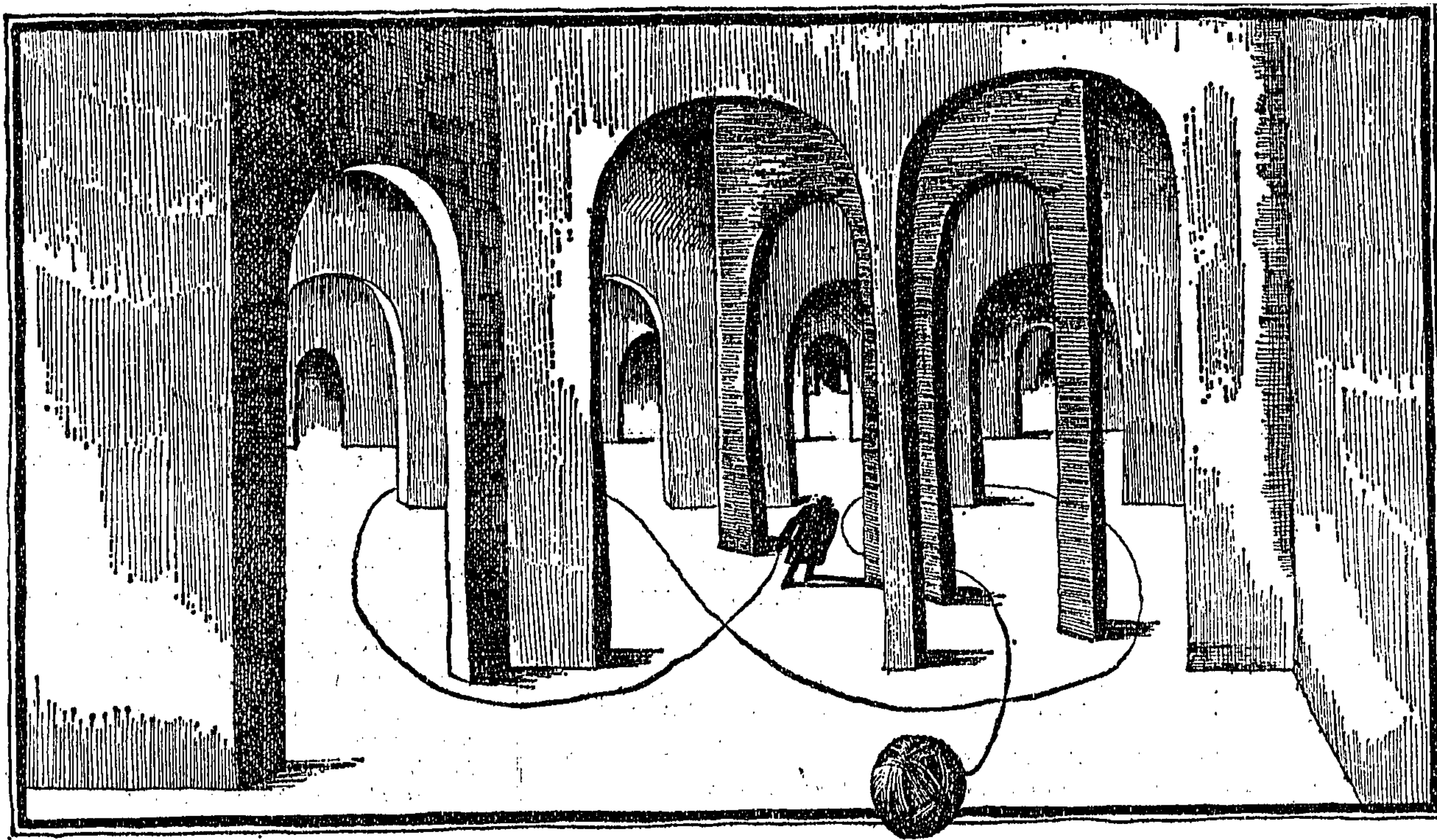


A Man Is Defined by His Longings



Eugene Mihaesco

By ROBERT E. MEAGHER

NOTRE DAME, Ind.—The violent man arms himself, calculates how he will respond to assaults or degrees of aggression or insult, practices for each conceivable extreme situation, rehearses for the exceptional. For the same reason, we are a violent country, even apart from the war in Vietnam and even if our entire nuclear crop forever lies fallow.

It is not the vagaries of fate and passion that we need fear most, but rather man's capacity to invent and imagine the urgent, to justify and celebrate a life lived beneath the growing shadow of horrors once merely possible and soon almost probable. It is not crimes of passion that need really alarm us, rather we

might dread, still more, crimes of logic, crimes of perverted wakefulness, crimes in which man responds to a hypothetical nightmare come true.

Pacifism as a theory may be argued, and as a doctrine preached, until the sun turns to water. And to little effect. Pacifism must be a way of life before it is argued or preached, not afterwards. Without a life of peace as the matrix of its rhetoric, pacifism is no more than a rather charged but vaporous hypothesis. We must live lives of peace. A life of peace must comprehend more than a broad stripe of meekness in the face of assault or a particular protest against a particularly abominable and fruitless conflict.

A life of peace is a human, "rational" life. When we say that man is

"rational," I would suggest that we mean that you and I are open, conscious, sensitive, or perhaps most clearly, "wakeful." Wakefulness is hardly equivalent to reasoning. Reasoning is all too often aimed at controlling, ordering, manipulating, calculating, and justifying. We are remorsefully aware that war and genocide can be validated and enshrined in an unwielding syllogism as easily as can the existence of God.

Logic bends readily to the pressure of opinion and serves its purpose. Wakefulness is also dangerously ambivalent, but in a different way. For man can be either wakeful to what is highest or wakeful to what is most urgent. I would argue that human wakefulness is directed most fittingly to that which is highest: wisdom, goodness, justice, and peace. A man's greatest efforts, a community's fullest energies, ought to be expended for the sake of man's profoundly soulful aspirations.

To stand wakeful to what threatens the fibers of our bodies is to risk what sounds the depths of our souls. Our ears are more diligently attuned to the wailing of bomb sirens than to the soft power of the bridegroom's invitations. It clearly matters that a man and a country take its bearings by its noblest conceivable perfection instead of by its most grave conceivable peril. It makes all the difference whether we beautify our lives and our cities or whether we fortify them. We delude ourselves if we imagine that we can

do both. The choice is between a home or an armory.

To ignore the urgent is not to dismantle it. And in the face of the inevitably urgent and exigent, man's wakefulness is finally insufficient and intermittent. Man resembles Job; but it is not fitting to audition for the part. "There is a time for hatred as well as for love. There is a season for war as for peace." There are times, cursed and out of joint, when man bows to the sleep of fatigue, instinct, and passion. When his life is invaded and threatened, even the man of peace responds perhaps too readily, perhaps too immoderately, bending plowshare to sword, the noble to the exigent, wisdom to cunning, wine to blood.

Once they are wrestling for their lives or for the lives of those whom they cherish, it is too late to distinguish the man of peace from the man of violence. What characterizes the man of peace is that he prefers to spend his days striving for the noble, rather than preparing for the urgent. The extreme, the violent, genuinely interrupts his life like the rattle of an until now unnoticed snake. The extreme, the violent, enters the violent man's life as the breathlessly awaited, though perhaps honestly dreaded, shrill of a trumpet sounding the attack.

An individual man is somehow defined by his expectations, his longings, his thirsts, by that to which he is wakeful. Blessed, indeed, are they who hunger and thirst for justice; for they are already just. Pitiably, indeed, are we, as Americans, who in so many respects have already abandoned the pursuit of wisdom, and holiness, and peace to prepare to stand fast and victorious against our supposedly "natural" enemies, for we are already there, foolish, blood-soaked, and responsible.

One only recourse against the urgent is the noble. Pacifism, as we have conceived of it, is but one dimension of a life of wakefulness to what is true, and beautiful, and good. Without hopes and thoughts that course deeply through our souls we will fall ready prey to the shallow fears and curiosities of men who erect their lives upon sand. Men without direction and purpose accept too readily the directions and purposes things fatefully assume. Pacifism, either as a proposal or as a protest, is vacuous in itself. Pacifism is more properly an implication than a policy. To define one's life in terms of peaceableness is to define it in terms of what it is not. And that is not enough. That alone which is enough is wakefulness to what is highest, a life of wisdom and holiness, a life in which pacifism is assumed.

Robert E. Meagher teaches in the department of theology at Notre Dame.