and B and halfway between them. Then wait for me at D, two kilometers from A and C, once again halfway between them. Kill me at D, as you are about to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," Scharlach replied, "I promise you the labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that is invisible and endless."

He stepped back a few steps. Then, very carefully, he fired.

1942

The Secret Miracle

And God caused him to die for an hundred years, and then raised him to life. And God said, "How long hast thou waited?" He said, "I have waited a day or part of a day."

Qur'an, 2:261

On the night of March 14, 1939, in an apartment on Prague's Zeltnergasse, Jaromir Hladik, author of the unfinished tragedy *The*

Enemies, a book titled *A Vindication of Eternity,* and a study of Jakob Boehme's indirect Jewish sources, dreamed of a long game of chess. The game was played not by two individuals, but by two illustrious families; it had been started many centuries in the past. No one could say what the forgotten prize was to be, but it was rumored to be vast, perhaps even infinite. The chess pieces and the chessboard themselves were in a secret tower. Jaromir (in the dream) was the firstborn son of one of the contending families; the clocks chimed the hour of the inescapable game; the dreamer was running across the sand of a desert in the rain, but he could recall neither the figures nor the rules of chess. At that point, Hladik awoke. The din of the rain and the terrible clocks ceased. A rhythmic and unanimous sound, punctuated by the barking of orders, rose from the Zeltnergasse. It was sunrise, and the armored vanguard of the Third Reich was rolling into Prague.

On the nineteenth, the authorities received a report from an informer. That same day, toward

dusk, Jaromir Hladik was arrested. He was led to a white, aseptic jail on the opposite bank of the Moldau. He was unable to refute even one of the Gestapo's charges: His mother's family's name was Jaroslavski, he came of Jewish blood, his article on Boehme dealt with a Jewish subject, his was one of the accusing signatures appended to a protest against the Anschluss. In 1928, he had translated the *Sefer Yetsirah* for Hermann Barsdorf Publishers; that company's effusive catalog had exaggerated (as commercial catalogs do) the translator's renown; the catalog had been perused by Capt. Julius Rothe, one of the officers in whose hands his fate now lay. There is no one who outside his own area of knowledge is not credulous; two or three adjectives in Fraktur were enough to persuade Julius Rothe of Hladik's preeminence, and therefore that he should be put to death—*pour encourager les autres*. The date was set for March 29, at 9:00a.m. That delay (whose importance the reader will soon discover) was caused by the administrative desire to work impersonally and deliberately, as vegetables do,

or planets.

Hladik's first emotion was simple terror. He reflected that he wouldn't have quailed at being hanged, or decapitated, or having his throat slit, but being shot by a firing squad was unbearable. In vain he told himself a thousand times that the pure and universal act of dying was what ought to strike fear, not the concrete circumstances of it, and yet Hladik never wearied of picturing to himself those circumstances.

Absurdly, he tried to foresee every variation. He anticipated the process endlessly, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. Long before the day that Julius Rothe had set, Hladik died hundreds of deaths—standing in courtyards whose shapes and angles ran the entire gamut of geometry, shot down by soldiers of changing faces and varying numbers who sometimes took aim at him from afar, sometimes from quite near. He faced his imaginary executions with true fear, perhaps with true courage.

Each enactment lasted several seconds; when

the circle was closed, Hladik would return, unendingly, to the shivering eve of his death. Then it occurred to him that reality seldom coincides with the way we envision it beforehand; he inferred, with perverse logic, that to foresee any particular detail is in fact to prevent its happening. Trusting in that frail magic, he began to invent horrible details—so *that they would not occur;* naturally he wound up fearing that those details might be prophetic. Miserable in the night, he tried to buttress his courage somehow on the fleeting stuff of time. He knew that time was rushing toward the morning of March 29; he reasoned aloud: *It is now the night of the twenty-second; so long as this night and six more last I am invulnerable, immortal.* He mused that the nights he slept were deep, dim cisterns into which he could sink. Sometimes, impatiently, he yearned for the shots that would end his life once and for all, the blast that would redeem him, for good or ill, from his vain imaginings. On the twenty-eighth, as the last rays of the sun were glimmering on the high bars of his window, he

was diverted from those abject thoughts by the image of his play, *The Enemies*.

Hladik was past forty. Apart from a few friends and many routines, the problematic pursuit of literature constituted the whole of his life; like every writer, he measured other men's virtues by what they had accomplished, yet asked that other men measure him by what he planned someday to do. All the books he had sent to the press left him with complex regret. Into his articles on the work of Boehme, Ibn Ezra, and Fludd, he had poured mere diligence, application; into his translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah,* oversight, weariness, and conjecture. He judged *A Vindication of Eternity to* be less unsatisfactory, perhaps. The first volume documents the diverse eternities that mankind has invented, from Parmenides' static Being to Hinton's modifiable past; the second denies (with Francis Bradley) that all the events of the universe constitute a temporal series. It argues that the number of humankind's possible experiences is *not* infinite, and that a single "repetition" is sufficient to prove that time is a

fallacy.... Unfortunately, no less fallacious are the arguments that prove that fallacy; Hladik was in the habit of ticking them off with a certain disdainful perplexity. He had also drafted a cycle of expressionist poems; these, to the poet's confusion, appeared in a 1924 anthology and there was never a subsequent anthology that didn't inherit them. With his verse drama *The Enemies,* Hladik believed he could redeem himself from all that equivocal and languid past. (He admired verse in drama because it does not allow the spectators to forget unreality, which is a condition of art.)

This play observed the unities of time, place, and action; it took place in Hradcany, in the library of Baron Römerstadt, on one of the last evenings of the nineteenth century. In Act I, Scene I, a stranger pays a visit to Römerstadt. (A clock strikes seven, a vehemence of last sunlight exalts the window-panes, on a breeze float the ecstatic notes of a familiar Hungarian melody.) This visit is followed by others; the persons who come to importune Römerstadt are strangers to him, though he has the uneasy

sense that he has seen them before, perhaps in a dream. All fawn upon him, but it is clear—first to the play's audience, then to the baron himself—that they are secret enemies, sworn to his destruction. Römerstadt manages to check or fend off their complex intrigues; in the dialogue they allude to his fiancée, Julia de Weidenau, and to one Jaroslav Kubin, who once importuned her with his love. Kubin has now gone mad, and believes himself to be Römerstadt.... The dangers mount; by the end of the second act, Römerstadt finds himself forced to kill one of the conspirators. Then the third and last act begins. Little by little, incoherences multiply; actors come back onstage who had apparently been discarded from the plot; for one instant, the man that Römerstadt killed returns. Someone points out that the hour has grown no later: the clock strikes seven; upon the high windowpanes the western sunlight shimmers; the thrilling Hungarian melody floats upon the air. The first interlocutor comes onstage again and repeats the same words he spoke in Act I, Scene I.

Without the least surprise or astonishment, Römerstadt talks with him; the audience realizes that Römerstadt is the pitiable Jaroslav Kubin. The play has not taken place; it is the circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences and re-experiences.

Hladik had never asked himself whether this tragic-comedy of errors was banal or admirable, carefully plotted or accidental. In the design I have outlined here, he had intuitively hit upon the best way of hiding his short-comings and giving full play to his strengths, the possibility of rescuing (albeit symbolically) that which was fundamental to his life. He had finished the first act and one or another scene of the third; the metrical nature of the play allowed him to go over it continually, correcting the hexameters, without a manuscript. It occurred to him that he still had two acts to go, yet very soon he was to die. In the darkness he spoke with God. *If,* he prayed, *I do somehow exist, if I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata, then I exist as the author* of The Enemies. *In order to complete that play, which can justify me and justify Thee*

as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself. It was the last night, the most monstrous night, but ten minutes later sleep flooded Hladik like some dark ocean.

Toward dawn, he dreamed that he was in hiding, in one of the naves of the Clementine Library. *What are you looking for?* a librarian wearing dark glasses asked him. *I'm looking for God,* Hladik replied.

God, the librarian said, *is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the four hundred thousand volumes in the Clementine. My parents and my parents' parents searched for that letter; I myself have gone blind searching for it.* He removed his spectacles and Hladik saw his eyes, which were dead. A reader came in to return an atlas. *This atlas is worthless,* he said, and handed it to Hladik. Hladik opened it at random. He saw a map of India—a dizzying page. Suddenly certain, he touched one of the tiny letters. A voice that was everywhere spoke to him: *The time for your labor has been granted.* Here Hladik awoke.

He remembered that the dreams of men belong to God and that Maimonides had written that the words of a dream, when they are clear and distinct and one cannot see who spoke them, are holy. Hladik put his clothes on; two soldiers entered the cell and ordered him to follow them.

From inside his cell, Hladik had thought that when he emerged he would see a maze of galleries, stairways, and wings. Reality was not so rich; he and the soldiers made their way down a single iron staircase into a rearyard. Several soldiers—some with their uniforms unbuttoned—were looking over a motorcycle, arguing about it. The sergeant looked at his watch; it was eight forty-four. They had to wait until nine. Hladik, feeling more insignificant than ill fortuned, sat down on a pile of firewood. He noticed that the soldiers' eyes avoided his own. To make the wait easier, the sergeant handed him a cigarette.

Hladik did not smoke; he accepted the cigarette out of courtesy, or out of humility. When he lighted it, he saw that his hands were

trembling. The day clouded over; the soldiers were speaking in low voices, as though he were already dead. Vainly he tried to recall the woman that Julia de Weidenau had symbolized....

The firing squad fell in, lined up straight. Hladik, standing against the prison wall, awaited the discharge.

Someone was afraid the wall would be spattered with blood; the prisoner was ordered to come forward a few steps. Absurdly, Hladik was reminded of the preliminary shufflings-about of photographers. A heavy drop of rain grazed Hladik's temple and rolled slowly down his cheek; the sergeant called out the final order.

The physical universe stopped.

The weapons converged upon Hladik, but the men who were to kill him were immobile. The sergeant's arm seemed to freeze, eternal, in an inconclusive gesture. On one of the paving stones of the yard, a bee cast a motionless shadow. As though in a painting, the wind had died. Hladik attempted a scream, a syllable, the

twisting of a hand. He realized that he was paralyzed. He could hear not the slightest murmur of the halted world. *I am in hell,* he thought, *I am dead.* Then *I am mad,* he thought. And then, *time has halted.* Then he reflected that if that were true, his thoughts would have halted as well. He tried to test this conjecture: he repeated (without moving his lips) Virgil's mysterious fourth eclogue. He imagined that the now-remote soldiers must be as disturbed by this as he was; he wished he could communicate with them. He was surprised and puzzled to feel neither the slightest weariness nor any faintness from his long immobility. After an indeterminate time, he slept. When he awoke, the world was still motionless and muffled. The drop of water still hung on his cheek; on the yard, there still hung the shadow of the bee; in the air the smoke from the cigarette he'd smoked had never wafted away. Another of those "days" passed before Hladik understood.

He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work; God in His omnipotence had

granted him a year. God had performed for him a secret miracle: the German bullet would kill him, at the determined hour, but in Hladik's mind a year would pass between the order to fire and the discharge of the rifles. From perplexity Hladik moved to stupor, from stupor to resignation, from resignation to sudden gratitude.

He had no document but his memory; the fact that he had to learn each hexameter as he added it imposed upon him a providential strictness, unsuspected by those who essay and then forget vague provisional paragraphs. He did not work for posterity, nor did he work for God, whose literary preferences were largely unknown to him. Painstakingly, motionlessly, secretly, he forged in time his grand invisible labyrinth. He re-did the third act twice. He struck out one and another overly obvious symbol—the repeated chimings of the clock, the music. No detail was irksome to him. He cut, condensed, expanded; in some cases he decided the original version should stand. He came to love the courtyard, the prison; one of the faces

that stood before him altered his conception of Romerstadt's character. He discovered that the hard-won cacophonies that were so alarming to Flaubert are mere *visual* superstitions—weaknesses and irritations of the written, not the sounded, word.... He completed his play; only a single epithet was left to be decided upon now. He found it; the drop of water rolled down his cheek.

He began a maddened cry, he shook his head, and the fourfold volley felled him.

Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9:02a.m.

Three Versions of Judas

There seemed a certainty in degradation.

T. E. Lawrence,
The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, CIII

In Asia Minor or in Alexandria, in the second century of our faith, in the days when Basilides