

renowned (and both of whom arrived in Amsterdam by train and made no complaint when they were put up at a three-star hotel), and the third a rather shadowy figure about whom no one knew anything, not even Morini, who, presenter or not, knew quite a bit about contemporary German literature.

And when the shadowy writer, who was Swabian, began to reminisce during his talk (or discussion) about his stint as a journalist, as an editor of arts pages, as an interviewer of all kinds of writers and artists wary of interviews, and then began to recall the era in which he had served as cultural promoter in towns that were far-flung or simply forgotten but interested in culture, suddenly, out of the blue, Archimboldi's name cropped up (maybe prompted by the previous talk led by Espinoza and Pelletier), since the Swabian, as it happened, had met Archimboldi while he was cultural promoter for a Frisian town, north of Wilhelmshaven, facing the Black Sea coast and the East Frisian islands, a place where it was cold, very cold, and even wetter than it was cold, with a salty wetness that got into the bones, and there were only two ways of making it through the winter, one, drinking until you got cirrhosis, and two, listening to music (usually amateur string quartets) in the town hall auditorium or talking to writers who came from elsewhere and who were given very little, a room at the only boardinghouse in town and a few marks to cover the return trip by train, those trains so unlike German trains today, but on which the people were perhaps more talkative, more polite, more interested in their neighbors, but anyway, writers who, after being paid and subtracting transportation costs, left these places and went home (which was sometimes just a room in Frankfurt or Cologne) with a little money and possibly a few books sold, in the case of those writers or poets (especially poets) who, after reading a few pages and answering the townspeople's questions, would set up a table and make a few extra marks, a fairly profitable activity back then, because if the audience liked what the writer had read, or if the reading moved them or entertained them or made them think, then they would buy one of his books, sometimes to keep as a souvenir of a pleasant evening, as the wind whistled along the narrow streets of the Frisian town, cutting into the flesh it was so cold, sometimes to read or reread a poem or story, back at home now, weeks after the event, maybe by the light of an oil lamp because there wasn't always electricity, of course, since the war had just ended and there were still gaping wounds, social and economic,



anyway, more or less the same as a literary reading today, with the exception that the books displayed on the table were self-published and now it's the publishing houses that set up the table, and one of these writers who came to the town where the Swabian was cultural promoter was Benno von Archimboldi, a writer of the stature of Gustav Heller or Rainer Kuhl or Wilhelm Frayn (writers whom Morini would later look up in his encyclopedia of German authors, without success), and he didn't bring books, and he read two chapters from a novel in progress, his second novel, the first, remembered the Swabian, had been published in Hamburg that year, although he didn't read anything from it, but that first novel did exist, said the Swabian, and Archimboldi, as if anticipating doubts, had brought a copy with him, a little novel about one hundred pages long, maybe longer, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and twenty-five pages, and he carried the novel in his jacket pocket, and, strangely, the Swabian remembered Archimboldi's jacket more clearly than the novel crammed into its pocket, a little novel with a dirty, creased cover that had once been deep ivory or a pale wheat color or gold shading into invisibility, but now was colorless and dull, just the title of the novel and the author's name and the colophon of the publishing house, whereas the jacket was unforgettable, a black leather jacket with a high collar, providing excellent protection against the snow and rain and cold, loose fitting, so it could be worn over heavy sweaters or two sweaters without anyone noticing, with horizontal pockets on each side, and a row of four buttons, neither very large nor very small, sewn on with something like fishing line, a jacket that brought to mind, why I don't know, the jackets worn by some Gestapo officers, although back then black leather jackets were in fashion and anyone who had the money to buy one or had inherited one wore it without stopping to think about what it suggested, and the writer who had come to that Frisian town was Benno von Archimboldi, the young Benno von Archimboldi, twenty-nine or thirty years old, and it had been he, the Swabian, who had gone to wait for him at the train station and who had accompanied him to the boardinghouse, talking about the weather, which was bad, and then had brought him to city hall, where Archimboldi hadn't set up any table and had read two chapters from a novel that wasn't finished yet, and then the Swabian had gone to dinner with him at the local tavern, along with the teacher and a widow who preferred music or painting to literature, but who, once resigned to not having music or painting,



was in no way averse to a literary evening, and it was she who somehow or other kept up the conversation during dinner (sausages and potatoes and beer: neither the times, recalled the Swabian, nor the town's budget allowed for anything more extravagant), although it might be truer to say that she steered it with a firm hand on the rudder, and the men who were around the table, the mayor's secretary, a man in the salted fish business, an old schoolteacher who kept falling asleep even with his fork in his hand, and a town employee, a very nice boy named Fritz who was a good friend of the Swabian's, nodded or were careful not to contradict the redoubtable widow whose knowledge of the arts was much greater than anyone else's, even the Swabian's, and who had traveled in Italy and France and had even, on one of her voyages, an unforgettable ocean crossing, gone as far as Buenos Aires, in 1927 or 1928, when the city was a meat emporium and the refrigerator ships left port laden with meat, a sight to see, hundreds of ships arriving empty and leaving laden with tons of meat headed all over the world, and when she, the lady, went out on deck, say at night, half asleep or seasick or ailing, all she had to do was lean on the rail and let her eyes grow accustomed to the dark and then the view of the port was startling and it instantly cleared away any vestiges of sleep or seasickness or other ailments, the nervous system having no choice but to surrender unconditionally to such a picture, the parade of immigrants like ants loading the flesh of thousands of dead cattle into the ships' holds, the movements of pallets piled with the meat of thousands of sacrificed calves, and the gauzy tint that shaded every corner of the port from dawn until dusk and even during the night shifts, the red of barely cooked steak, of T-bones, of filet, of ribs grilled rare, terrible, thank goodness the lady, who wasn't a widow at the time, had to see it only the first night, then they disembarked and took rooms at one of the most expensive hotels in Buenos Aires, and they went to the opera and then to a ranch where her husband, an expert horseman, agreed to race with the rancher's son, who lost, and then with a ranch hand, the son's right-hand man, a gaucho, who also lost, and then with the gaucho's son, a little sixteen-year-old gaucho, thin as a reed and with bright eyes, so bright that when the lady looked at him he lowered his head and then lifted it a little and gave her such a wicked look that she was offended, what an insolent urchin, while her husband laughed and said in German: you've made quite an impression on the boy, a joke the lady didn't find the least bit funny, and then the little gaucho mounted



his horse and they set off, the boy could really gallop, he clung to the horse so tightly it was as if he were glued to its neck, and he sweated and thrashed it with his whip, but in the end her husband won the race, he hadn't been captain of a cavalry regiment for nothing, and the rancher and the rancher's son got up from their seats and clapped, good losers, and the rest of the guests clapped too, excellent rider, this German, extraordinary rider, although when the little gaucho reached the finish line, or in other words the porch, he didn't look like a good loser, a dark, angry expression on his face, his head down, and while the men, speaking French, scattered along the porch in search of glasses of ice-cold champagne, the lady went up to the little gaucho, who was left standing alone, holding his horse's reins in his left hand (at the other end of the long yard the little gaucho's father headed off toward the stables with the horse the German had ridden), and told him, in an incomprehensible language, not to be sad, that he had ridden an excellent race but her husband was good too and more experienced, words that to the little gaucho sounded like the moon, like the passage of clouds across the moon, like a slow storm, and then the little gaucho looked up at the lady with the eyes of a bird of prey, ready to plunge a knife into her at the navel and slice up to the breasts, cutting her wide open, his eyes shining with a strange intensity, like the eyes of a clumsy young butcher, as the lady recalled, which didn't stop her from following him without protest when he took her by the hand and led her to the other side of the house, to a place where a wrought-iron pergola stood, bordered by flowers and trees that the lady had never seen in her life or which at that moment she thought she had never seen in her life, and she even saw a fountain in the park, a stone fountain, in the center of which, balanced on one little foot, a creole cherub with smiling features danced, part European and part cannibal, perpetually bathed by three jets of water that spouted at its feet, a fountain sculpted from a single piece of black marble, a fountain that the lady and the little gaucho admired at length, until a distant cousin of the rancher appeared (or a mistress whom the rancher had lost in the deep folds of memory), telling her in brusque and serviceable English that her husband had been looking for her for some time, and then the lady walked out of the enchanted park on the distant cousin's arm, and the little gaucho called to her, or so she thought, and when she turned he spoke a few hissing words, and the lady stroked his head and asked the cousin what the little gaucho had said, her fingers



lost in the thick curls of his hair, and the cousin seemed to hesitate for a moment, but the lady, who wouldn't tolerate lies or half-truths, demanded an immediate, direct translation, and the cousin said: he says . . . he says the boss . . . arranged it so your husband would win the last two races, and then the cousin was quiet and the little gaucho went off toward the other end of the park, dragging on his horse's reins, and the lady rejoined the party but she couldn't stop thinking about what the little gaucho had confessed at the last moment, the sainted lamb, and no matter how much she thought, his words were still a riddle, a riddle that lasted the rest of the party, and tormented her as she tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep, and made her listless the next day during a long horseback ride and barbecue, and followed her back to Buenos Aires and all through the days she was at the hotel or went out to receptions at the German embassy or the English embassy or the Ecuadorean embassy, and was solved only days after her ship set sail for Europe, one night, at four in the morning, when the lady went out to stroll the deck, not knowing or caring what parallel or longitude they were at, surrounded or partially surrounded by forty-one million square miles of salt water, just then, as the lady lit a cigarette on the first-class passengers' first deck, with her eyes fixed on the expanse of ocean that she couldn't see but could hear, the riddle was miraculously solved, and it was then, at that point in the story, said the Swabian, that the lady, the once rich and powerful and intelligent (in her fashion, at least) Frisian lady, fell silent, and a religious, or worse, superstitious hush fell over that sad postwar German tavern, where everyone began to feel more and more uncomfortable and hurried to mop up what was left of their sausage and potatoes and swallow the last drops of beer from their mugs, as if they were afraid that at any moment the lady would begin to howl like a Fury and they judged it wise to prepare themselves to face the cold journey home with full stomachs.

And then the lady spoke. She said:

"Can anyone solve the riddle?"

That's what she said, but she didn't look at any of the townspeople or address them directly.

"Does anyone know the answer to the riddle? Does anyone understand it? Is there by chance a man in this town who can tell me the solution, even if he has to whisper it in my ear?"

She said all of this with her eyes on her plate, where her sausage and her serving of potatoes remained almost untouched.