Audio Guide Transcript

Le Cirque [The Circus]

Tériade, 1967

For me, a circus is a magic spectacle that passes by and melts away like a world. There is an unsettling circus, a circus of depths.

I see it again — Vitebsk, my native town, and there on a poor street, before three or four onlookers, a man who had come with a small boy and a small girl.

Before beginning his act, he laid down on the ground a rug the colour of earth, which raised the dust. He drew out a pole, three or four metres long, that he held propped against his belt.

The boy, a pink leotard clinging to his skin, climbed up along the pole. Reaching the top, he folded himself like a snake. He did not smile, and his face had a greyish cast. You might have thought he hadn't shaved in a long time — and yet he was far too young.

Below, his father, dressed in an acrobat's costume, held the pole against his belly, raised it up to his face, then into his mouth, where you could see his yellowed teeth.

The boy came down. Now the little girl climbed in her turn. A child with two small braids, in a multicoloured dress — so slight, and looking so tired...

She descended from the pole, and nothing stirred in the street, nor from the height she came down from. I do not know whether anyone gave them so much as a coin. And it seemed to me that it was I who was folding and unfolding up there...

Another time, I caught sight of a small girl. To me she was like a bareback rider without a horse. In the emptiness of the courtyard her sheer tights shimmered. When the vision of her returned to me at night, I was struck dumb with fear.

These visions pierced me through. That ghost of a girl, like the boy, evaporated long ago. Where are they now? Where will they have ended their days? And so, like them, I shall count my age, year by year.

These clowns, these bareback riders, these acrobats have taken up residence in my visions. Why? Why do their make-up and their grimaces move me so? With them I draw near to other horizons. Their colours and their make-up carry me toward other psychic distortions that I dream of painting.

And when, in everyday life, I see a man who, instead of living normally, "plays a part," I have the feeling that I am moving through a circus — but what a circus!

Sometimes, in years gone by, I have seen a great actor pass, through his playing, beyond the frontiers of the theatre; and sometimes a clown so brilliant that he passed beyond the frontiers of the circus.

I remember seeing, in my native town, an actor with long hair, wearing a cape. He had come to Vitebsk with a whole troupe of actors to give performances in the town theatre. He played his roles in the classical pieces, but he himself had the air of a clown.

Long ago, returning home, I caught sight, through a window at the corner of the street, of a dead man. Later, I took him as a figure for my painting. I laid him in the middle of the street, I set the musician upon the roof, and so, perhaps, I made of it an illogical circus.

I remember seeing, in the window of a Paris gallery, a painting that showed a shoe on a chair: the painting was by Van Gogh. I remember also another of his pictures, the Landscape with Crows. For me these were elements of a tragic circus.

Alas, in life I have seen a ridiculous circus: someone thundered to terrify the world, and a thunder of applause answered him.

I have also seen how people push themselves toward glory and toward money: it is always the circus.

A revolution that does not lead toward its ideal is, perhaps, also a circus.

All these thoughts and feelings, I would like to hide them in the opulent tail of a circus horse, and to run after it, like the other little clown, begging for pity, that it might drive earthly sadness away.

And if I have made paintings, it is because I remember my mother, her breasts that nourished and exalted me so warmly, and I am ready to hang myself upon the moon.

This cloud, this silent man who walks upon the rooftops,
And so am I, lost and in tears.
Each day he sees his cross covered with crowns of flowers,
But he holds in his hand only a blade of grass,
The grass he has brought from his native town.
He seeks his God.

I would like to live, and to fulfil all the dreams of the figures drawn in this book.

They speak as in a feverish state
And could flood the earth with their tears, like rain.
In these figures I can hide my sorrow,
Hide a sad face that smiles,
Hide those poor people who grow poorer the higher they fly,
Fly toward the other planets.
I hear them say:
"My body is like a shadow.
I do not know where you are. Perhaps I am alive.
Perhaps I am dead, alone, alone.
I love this country, but I love you more."

I hear the pleading words of this circus man before he goes out before the public:

"My body walks,
My legs, my arms, my friends.
If I am sad, I keep my tears within.
For a long time now, no more tears.
I would not have the clouds hear my laments.
Will I be remembered when, like a stone, I sleep?
Will I be remembered when there is no awakening?

One will hear sighs, the sadness of years gone by.

Someone points a finger:
There is the clown who wept while smiling,
There is the clown who, in the night, sat down beside the stones
And dreamed of stars,
Dreamed of love, of caresses.
This chattering clown smeared with blue and green,
This clown lying beneath his horse, says:
It is not I, it is the one in the drawings of this book."

I walk upon the earth, asleep as in a dream.
I turn through the length of the year.
I turn like the world in the sky.
Who will tell me my end,
Will count my days and my nights?
My smile slips off and comes to rest upon the trees.

I melt like a candle burning down.
I no longer hear, I no longer seek the star.
The wind blows from on high.
It halts my play and my sighing.
It has scattered the pages of my youth,
Has stilled my tears for ever.
I embroider a crown of flowers from another world.
They come down trembling like beggars in their poverty,
Like young brides dressed in white.

This imaginary world gives no answer. All the musicians of those paintings break off their playing on their cloud. I hear them, they call me from afar.

It is a magic word, the circus — a thousand-year-old game that dances itself, where tears and smiles, the play of legs and arms, take the form of a great art.

And what do most of these circus people receive? A piece of bread. The night brings them solitude, sadness. Until the next day, when the evening, flooded with electric lights, announces to them a new old life.

The circus is the spectacle that seems to me the most tragic of all.

Through the centuries, it has been the keenest cry within man's longing for pleasure and joy. It takes, often, the form of high poetry. I seem to see in it a Don Quixote in search of an ideal — like that inspired clown who wept, and dreamed of human love.

Somewhere within me, or outside me, strange thoughts prowl at the sight of this great cage filled with beasts, this great iron Ark filled with lions and tigers. Before me stands Noah's Ark. On the other side of the bars sit those whom Noah chose to save from the Flood. In Noah's place moves a young tamer, a whip in his hand. He commands. I do not see the white bird that could fly out to announce peace on earth to the world.

Some music or other is being played.

I sit there, naked, waiting for these beasts to fling themselves upon us and avenge themselves for not being human. Perhaps it is for this reason that they roar, grimace, furious, discontented with our human world!

From their wide-open jaws I hear another truth coming forth — an animal truth, unknown to us. They roar of other secrets of the world, beyond comprehension, of contempt for us and for their prison. They stand ready today to devour us.

What clown could open a mouth so laden with symbols, could show teeth so white, so red, so sharp as lightning!

I have drawn these lions before — on King Solomon's throne, at the feet of King David, on the arch of the Temple. I have seen their image on the robes of the high priests, on the carpets of palaces.

The music ceases.

We take our leave of the circus beasts. The tamer opens the small gate, the offended wild creatures pass through into their odorous cages, and we go off toward our bedrooms, with our ordinary dreams.

Among the lions

I am the angel.

I do not hear the sounds of the earth

And the cries of the houses.

Among the horses and the birds

I am their brother,

Their weeping son.

For them I am full of longing.

The air of the sky in my heart

Goes out toward them.

I seek their gaze and their sign

And await their call.
I am their acknowledged painter.
Cow of my distant town

From whom my mother drew the milk for me,
In the earth where you lie
Were born and buried my tears.
My paintings, made after your likeness,
Return to you
And bow down before you.

The horse that drew the cart
And carried the dead man
Toward his house,
That horse, I have painted him.
There he is upon my canvas,
And all the beasts lie down,
Here within the book,
With my sighs.
I am far from the beasts
That walk on two legs,
From those words that come
From between their teeth,
That wake me
From my sleep
In broad daylight,
From those who are far away,
From the calm and silent love,
Vast and deep
As the tears of Moses
Upon Mount Sinai.

I weep each hour
At having been born yesterday,
Born too late,
At not having lived
In the hollows of mountains
With my prayer upon my lips.
And when a man draws near,
The leaves upon my body
Begin to tremble.
Autumn and winter
Pierce into me, and I fall,
An angel without wings.

All my life I have drawn horses that look more like donkeys or cows. I saw them in Lyozno, at my grandfather's — whom I often asked to take me with him to the surrounding villages, where he went to buy livestock for his butcher's shop. He killed them under a shed in the courtyard.

I remember, one day, deciding to climb onto the back of one of these horses. I had not the time to seat myself before I had already fallen from his round, warm back, and I found myself beneath his round belly, which I saw breathing peacefully. He had kindly stayed still, and had not trampled the boy with his rustic hooves.

At the sight of horses, who are forever in a state of ecstasy, I think: perhaps they are happier than we are? One can quietly kneel before a horse and pray. He always lowers his eyes with a flow of modesty. I hear in my belly the resonance of horses' footsteps. I could ride upon a horse for the first and last time, toward the bright arena of life. I would have the awareness of going beyond myself, of no longer being alone among the silent beings of whom God alone knows what they think of us.

These animals — the horses, the cows, the goats — among the trees and hills, all of them are silent. We chatter, we sing, we write poems, we trace drawings that they do not read, that they neither see nor hear. This book is not for them.

I would like to draw near to that bareback rider who has just appeared, smiling; her dress, a bouquet of flowers. I would surround her with my years in bloom and out of bloom. On my knees, I would tell her of my visions and dreams — not of this earth.

After her horse I would run, to ask her how to live, how to escape from myself, from the world; toward whom to run, where to go.

And now another world comes into my head. It bears no resemblance to the human comedy. A world that leads toward other horizons.

I wonder how a Rembrandt lived, a Titian, a Giotto, or the Prophets; how He lived, our Brother, whom the world has made divine. How many times I have thought to let my colours flow until they became a river, to cast across it a bridge upon which I would have wished to walk and to speak, as He did, of love and of crucifixion.

I enter my circus.
A weeping clown stands before me.
He is like a broken egg,
From his mouth runs the yolk.
From behind his head emerges a pigeon, newly born.

I walk upon a celestial bridge.
The years, transparent as clouds, float around me.
I am only a clear garment without a body.
I see a dance of arms and of legs.
I hear the echo of centuries and millennia,
As if someone were embracing me,
He speaks to me of the life that has been lived,
I am transformed into a bouquet of marble
And everything is covered in morning frost.

The wind blows before me
But my roses of stone will wait for you a long while.
Silently each day climbs into the heights
And melts into the clouds.
And each day I wait for another day and another night.
How long is this world,
Like a blue painting,
Going to turn around me?
Upon the stage of life there remain the laughter and the tears
And the noise of the orchestra.

If only I could find the words
And the colours.
If only I could find the key.

It would open for me the door of the universe
That for thousands of years
Has hovered about us,
Draws us, calls us,
And leaves us at the threshold,
At the crossing of the roads.

Each day at the rising of the sun
I see this world anew.
It has slumbered in my heart
And its name, like a precious stone,
Shines upon my hand.
Toward the close of the day
This stone melts, runs down,
Covers the sky with the red of blood.
It covers our dreams and our hopes
And all the games of the day.

Am I like the other Moses
Who did not enter his Jerusalem?
All his life he wrestled with God
And made the Bible before his people.
I bear his name,
I have engraved only his Tables of the Law.

I have imagined the figures of my paintings.
They walk with their heads down,
Their hands stretched out toward the flowers and the tomb.
Often they seem to me more beautiful when they are sleeping

Or when they are dead.
They are not as beautiful as a tree,
A cliff,
Or anything that is silent in nature.

At night, through my head
There pass
Scattered words,
Fragments of thought,
Pieces of paintings,
Like the brushstrokes of Van Gogh,
Like the will-o'-the-wisps of Mozart.
I would like to hold on to these words,
To return to sleep.
I want to sleep.
But they race inside me,
Around me,
Like circus horses
Without their riders.

Life itself turns
Like a circus
Covered in the words
Of Kafka's Trial,
In the speech of those who run in place
But stay motionless,
Of those who died yesterday
And are reborn today.

I have entered the body of Mozart,
The bones of my parents,
The soil of Mars and of the moon,
And I say within myself:
This is not me.

Have I played beyond the circus,
Have I gone past my own circus,
Have I not yet played at all?
I do not want to play.

This book, like my paintings,
Will not bow down,
Asks for nothing.
I ask:
Only you.
I ask:
Love me.

I see only you who live only for me.
Each day you set before me the flowers of our garden.
Each day, the fruits arrange themselves upon the plates and in the baskets.
In the night, the birds with human feet and trembling souls
Fly upon the horses.
They play with lions, with bears.
I have drawn them in this book.

But I keep, for myself, my love for you.
I hide you, you who are my hope.
I look into your eyes.
I seek my future, which shines like the dawn.
From your hands I would receive the blessings.
I tell myself that, when you are with me,
I remain alive.
I am within my paintings and within my words,
Far from the heights of this world.
How am I to draw near to you, with what steps?
To draw near, and to make a gift to you of my destiny.

But the words fail me.
My heart, across distant cities and distant years,
Speaks to you of my joy.
And all the colours and all the words already spoken,
I give them to you.
I look into your eyes and seek there yet more promises.

I would like to take from your head the weeds of cares
And to give you the flowers of this book.
Near to you, without words,
I wait for calm,
And from your hands I shall receive the future.
Your words echo
As, for me, once echoed the words of the Bible.

This air enters my soul.
Like a bouquet of flowers, it waters my day.
Seated upon a cloud, it promises me calm.
I have dreamed of a new spring.
I have dreamed of another day and another hour.
In your hands the foliage of my youth has trembled.
On the threshold of your door, I have transformed it into a coloured cloud.
My years turn around the world.
I seek for them.
I seek, in the other unknown worlds, the love I have imagined.
Where is it?
It is in the other world,
A new world that does not exist within the world.
I listen to its voices that call me from every side.

I do not want to play my part.
Let these words, my words, come from my mouth,
From my eyes, from my nostrils,
So that at last I may see your smile appear.
I feel my weary tears flowing.

Another clown, philosopher and sage,
Has perceived even the end of this world,
Has foretold that, behind the distant clouds,
One catches sight of God Himself.
I have dreamed with my smiles, with my coloured nose.
I have dreamed until my last performance.
Give this clown a bouquet, that he may cease his weeping.

In colours of fire — red, gold, silver —
he comes out into the middle of the stage.
He pronounces words as if engraved with his teeth.
He rises, climbs toward the celestial orbits.
One hears his weeping and his sobs.
He goes toward his tomb.

He asks: What is this play?
In what sky, on what earth is it being played?
For whom, and to what end?
He would like to sit down, to recite aloud,
Recite the psalms to an unknown God,
That this play might last a long while.
A whole world — birds, animals —
Pours forth from his hands, from his legs.
A whole night, he has performed in the circus.
Out of the heights the moon has come forth.
She has lit with a green light
This play that has been played since eternity.

In the night, you start awake.
You feel within you the presence of Eternity.
The endless night.
The morning sets me dreaming with its new clarity.

I dream that I am in a circus.

But no, I am stretched out on my bed.
Far off, around this bed,
Gallop the horses, the bareback riders.
The clown is laughing.

A pink acrobat fans me with her fan.
She calls to me.
She whispers to me to sleep still, to live still.

I have imagined my circus in the night hours.
It stands in the middle of my room.
One hears the laughter and the cries.

As in a temple, God is seated beside me.
I have applauded, but God is silent. He calms me.

These hundreds of drawn lines,
These splashes of colour carry me away beyond the wings of the world,
Where I am alone, like the horse in its corner.

I am the friend of this clown.
Standing at the entrance, he awaits his turn.
I am in the bed.
I turn from one side to the other.
This clown — he is he and I.
He declaims.
With the brush in my hand, I draw him.
I go out with him to take the bow.
I applaud the audience. I sit down.

Clothed in white, this horse from my painting gallops.
He breathes in the vapours.
He looks toward me as if I alone resembled him.

These acrobats sway in the heights.

They pass from one hand to another,
They pass from one leg to other legs.
They are dressed in blue and in pink.

I follow them with my gaze.
I surround them with the shadows and the nuances of this book.

My circus is performed in the sky.
It is performed in the clouds, among the chairs,
Performed in the window where the moon is reflected.
In the street below, a man passes.
He puts out the lamps of the city.
The performance is over!