

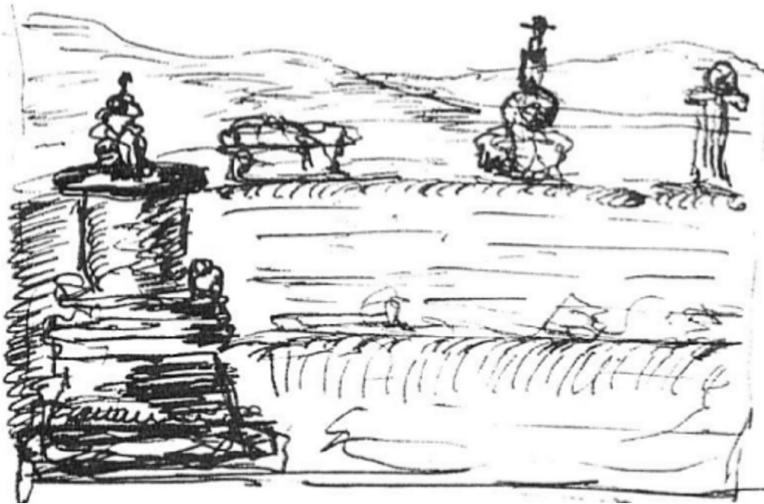
## Quo Vadis, Domine?

For the Monday after Ascension

Written on July 27, 1958

### Cast

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| PETER                          | light blue garment,<br>dark blue wrap  |
| BEGGAR                         | torn toga                              |
| AUGUSTA, older, broad-set lady | white tunic, grey mantle               |
| JULIA, girl                    | } with long sleeves, grey<br>headdress |
| OCTAVIA, girl                  |  |
| VOICES (sounding from above)   |  |



*Via Appia. In the left foreground, a Roman tombstone. In the background, along the road cutting the stage from left to right, three further tombstones, but only indicated. Behind them, the plain and in the distance the Sabine Hills, visible in the gentle twilight. It is evening and incipient twilight pervades the stage. PETER is sitting at at the base of the tombstone, his face hidden in hands; his body is shaking with repeated sobs.*

VOICES [*from above in chorus*]: Quo vadis, Domine?

PETER [*as in echo*]: Quo vadis, Domine?

VOICES: Quo vadis, Domine?

PETER: Quo vadis, Domine?

VOICES: Quo vadis, Domine?

PETER: Just on and ever on

    Their voices sound

    And admonish me about the disgrace

    I committed.

    My resolve

    Remained in their sense hidden to me

    When at midday

    In the heat of the Sun

    I passed through the gate of Rome

    And turned to the south.

    Now I know:

    I wanted to flee from death;

    I wanted to escape from dying!

    And called it working on

    For the Son of Man,

    Finding new people,

    Founding young groups of people

    In service to Christ.

    But then it happened –

*[He shakes with repeated sobs and is prevented from speaking further. Behind the tombstone the BEGGAR's head appears with tousled hair and disturbed face, looking like the picture of St Anthony.]*

BEGGAR: Hello, friend,

    [PETER is startled and turns his head]

    Can you hear me?

    Are you weeping?

    You seem shaken?

    Full of pain and grief?

Have you suffered an injustice?

Or has perhaps a fellow man

Insulted you

And done you wrong?

[*PETER is silent*]

Are you dumb?

VOICES: Quo vadis, Domine?

PETER: Do you hear the voices?

They speak the same words

As are burning in my heart:

Quo vadis, Domine?

BEGGAR: What do they mean –

Those words?

Have they so struck you

That you shake with sobs

Just like the storm wind

Sweeping though leaves on a tree?

PETER: Do you hear the words:

Quo vadis, Domine?

VOICES: Quo vadis, Domine?

BEGGAR: And again they resounded!

Calling and ringing and sounding,

As though angel voices

Wanted to say something with human words!

D'you know, friend, that I've

Never yet before

Heard, experienced or undergone

Anything of the kind?

Aren't they sounding again?

D'you hear them?

PETER [*resigned*]: I do hear them –

But it is only in my heart

That they sound

Like the toll of a bell

From the realm of conscience!

Oh, these words, this anguish,

Oh, this sore disgrace!

[*The BEGGAR comes forward from behind the tombstone and sits down beside Peter.*

*He takes a piece of bread out of his pouch and starts eating.*]

BEGGAR: I still don't yet know

What's happened to you.

But likewise I don't know

What's happened to me.

I know just one thing:

I need bread!

And you,

Won't you share with me, brother,

And at the same time tell me

What came upon you?

PETER [*musings*]: Evening is setting in,

Through its shadows

Wafts a breath of coolness.

The soul's divining wakens

In earthly depths

And rises, listening,

Over all existence.

The stillness is working

Like a distant blue gleam

And stars above kindling

Their lights.

The eyes of gods

Are looking

Down upon us men

And finding in the soul's divining

Which blossoms in human hearts

The wine,

And in the fullness

Of world experience

Which overwhelmed the senses  
 After the course of day  
 The bread,  
 To be their nourishment.  
 They need them for their deeds.  
*[It has grown dark, so the figures and events  
 on stage are only seen as shadows.]*

PETER: Do you hear?

Those are steps approaching us!  
 Are they searching for the fugitive?  
 Will they find the betrayer?

BEGGAR: Have you committed murder, friend?  
 Stolen? Violated?  
 That you believe yourself pursued?  
 And was it the voice of pursuers,  
 Of the Erinyes, driving you  
 And oppressing you with the words:  
 Quo vadis, Domine?  
 But listen, the steps are getting louder  
 And coming towards us,  
 Yet not hastily,  
 Rather groping, searching.

*[From the right three women appear, visible only  
 as shadows: JULIA, AUGUSTA and OCTAVIA.  
 Augusta is the eldest, broad-set, Julia and Octavia  
 are still girls. They have not noticed the two men  
 in the foreground. With a few soft steps they move  
 to the middle of the stage.]*

AUGUSTA *[quietly, almost whispering]*:

Your dream deceived you,  
 Julia.  
 He isn't here.  
 He'll already be far in the south  
 And somewhere in the Sabine Hills  
 Lying down to sleep

In a shepherd's hut.  
 Without reason you've  
 Brought upon us the disaster of this night.  
 We'll try at once  
 Taking the way back to Rome.

OCTAVIA: O mother, let's still  
 Search a little bit further  
 On this road.  
 Perhaps an omen  
 Will appear before us –  
 A call may reach us  
 Indicating the direction!

AUGUSTA: The admonition of the dead  
 Will rise up from the graves;  
 And their untransformed offences  
 Will swirl through our hair  
 Like bats.  
 The agony of the dead  
 Will be feeding upon us  
 So that the anxiety and fear of living people  
 Become their food.  
 A dead person needs the bread of anxiety  
 And also the wine of fear  
 If he wants to stay in earthly space.  
 But listen!  
 Isn't the host already approaching  
 Of deceased people, of the sick, ailing,  
 Poor, mangy?  
 Oh, come, let's flee towards Rome,  
 To the haven of its houses.

JULIA: My dream is true!  
 Because it wasn't a dream.  
 I saw how Peter  
 Was standing at an abyss  
 And out of the depths came

A cockcrow.  
 Three times sounded the call  
 And three times it cut deep  
 Into my soul.  
 Peter wavered,  
 He was shaken  
 And already placing his foot  
 Over the brink of the chasm,  
 To follow the call  
 Into the depths.  
 Then the picture faded  
 And I woke up.  
 When I then heard  
 That the man of God  
 Had left the city  
 I was quite sure  
 That he was heading for ruin  
 And that henchmen were pursuing him.

AUGUSTA: But here it's night!  
 Only dead people are around us  
 And slurping already quite close  
 For our souls.  
 They want to threaten us  
 Because they suffer hunger.  
*[In the distance the barking of dogs,  
 becoming louder and then softer again.]*

PETER *[to the beggar]*:  
 It is not the Erinyes  
 Appearing here.  
 It is human compassion  
 Searching for me.

BEGGAR *[softly to Peter]*: Be quiet and still,  
 Let's wait for whatever happens.  
 The hour is now coming  
 Which I long for every night,

*[The barking and howling of the dogs  
 grows stronger.]*  
 When this necropolis comes alive  
 And rises up gasping.  
 Death is now holding the scoop  
 In his hand  
 And scattering seeds of terror  
 Over all the earth.  
*[In the meantime the three women have  
 followed the voice of the Beggar and  
 come into the foreground, holding on  
 to one another.]*

AUGUSTA: It's too late.  
 The tide of the necropolis  
 Has caught us.  
 There's no rock  
 On which we can find help.  
 Mists of horror are rising up  
 And going to drown us.  
*[A high-pitched sighing and sobbing  
 as of children's voices sounds.]*

OCTAVIA: O Mother,  
 Our end has come.  
 Will the birds of death  
 Bleed our life away?

AUGUSTA: It's the nightmare's voices.  
 They're coming ever closer,  
 To destroy us.

BEGGAR *[standing up and drawing close to the women]*:  
 Only here, in the realm of the dead,  
 Is there life.  
 Here rules fear, terror,  
 Horror.  
 Here's the house  
 Where we're at home.

[A strange greenish light appears around him  
like an aura, and the voice of the nightmare  
sounds again.]

JULIA: Here's the chasm  
At which Peter stands.  
It's the place  
Where I can find him.

[PETER comes forward to the women.]

|       |       |         |         |
|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| +     | +     | +       | +       |
| Peter | Julia | Augusta | Octavia |
| +     |       |         | +       |
|       |       |         | Beggar  |

PETER: Here I am!  
It *was* the abyss  
At which I stood.  
It *is* so no longer.  
I know what still remains for me to do.

JULIA: So you are here!  
So my dream-image wasn't  
Madness and sham.

[The barking and howling, which has  
become even louder, has fallen quiet.  
A delicate light begins to shine, just enough that  
the figures can be perceived more clearly.]

PETER: But tell me who you are,  
Setting out to seek me  
In the realm of the dead?

JULIA: We heard you  
At one or other time  
When you told people  
About the kingdom of God,  
When you brought tidings

About the Son of Heaven  
And spoke to us about the Cross  
And about the Resurrection.  
Your words formed into pictures  
And came alive  
Shining in our hearts.

OCTAVIA: And recently  
At the Lord's table we were allowed  
To be nourished  
By His blood  
And His body.

AUGUSTA: A stream of grace went  
Through our being and our life.  
So we knew about you  
And about your followers.

PETER: Your dream, O maiden,  
Showed you the truth.  
I stood at death's abyss  
And again the cock crowed  
And wanted  
Me to  
Betray and deny Him, of whom I  
Spoke to you.  
I fled from death.  
I did not want death.  
I wanted  
To escape from the place of death.  
And then it happened!

[PETER turns away, because he cannot  
speak further.]

OCTAVIA: What was it that happened?  
Can you no longer speak?

PETER: Oh, that I could say it!  
It was the Lord  
Approaching me!

AUGUSTA: The Lord?

JULIA: He Himself? The Lord?

OCTAVIA: The Lord, in His own shape?

BEGGAR: Be quiet, speak no further,  
 For what you're saying is just  
 Lie and slander.  
 Your Lord is dead.  
 He's a nightmare  
 Pouring fear and terror  
 Into human souls.  
 I know him!  
 He lives in this necropolis  
 As one of the dead.  
 He's made me  
 Into his slave  
 And sucks me out by night.  
 Be silent,  
 Otherwise I must die myself.  
 You're a trickster  
 And your Lord a ...

*[He shouts himself so hoarse and wild  
 that he cannot speak further and struggles  
 for words. The others look at him in  
 astonishment and try to calm him down.]*

BEGGAR *[breaking from shouting into sobs, stammering]*:

Oh, speak,  
 Oh, speak about your Lord.  
 I know he is now walking  
 In the light of the Earth.

VOICES: In earthly light  
 Is the Lord walking.

PETER: Quo vadis, Domine?

VOICES: No more to Rome,  
 For you go there yourself  
 To find your death.

*[When the Voices sound, JULIA, AUGUSTA  
 and OCTAVIA cover their faces. PETER leads them  
 to the foot of the tombstone, where they sit down.  
 At the sound of the Voices the BEGGAR falls  
 to his knees and remains in that position.]*

PETER *[standing, turns to the three women]*: I owe you  
 The solution to this riddling night  
 Which sought to kill  
 You at the abyss I created.  
 I did not want  
 To submit to death,  
 So I fled from the city  
 Lest I should enter together  
 With my brothers, my sisters  
 In the arena of this existence  
 Before thousands  
 Into the realm of light.  
 As I went southwards down the road  
 And, passing tomb after tomb,  
 Believed that I was escaping  
 From death with every step,  
 The Sun glowed  
 And the air was warm  
 And dancing over meadows and bushes.  
 Then I saw a figure of light  
 Approaching me.  
 My heart was frightened. It convulsed  
 In its beat –  
 For before me stood the Lord  
 And spoke:  
 'Quo vadis, Domine?'  
 I said: 'Lord, I'm going  
 To serve you.'  
 Then he said:  
 'Then I must once more go to die!'

And took a cross  
 Which suddenly lay before him on the road  
 And raised it to his shoulders.  
 At that the radiant light  
 Surrounding him faded away.  
 He stood before me as a poor earthly man  
 Arming himself for death.  
 I fell upon my knees  
 As the beggar there has sunk to his knees,  
 And spoke:  
 'My Lord and God, die not instead of me,  
 Let me suffer the death  
 Ordained for me.'  
 Then light again rayed from his eyes  
 And he said: 'Peter.'  
 Not more than that word, just: Peter.  
 I asked him:  
 'Quo vadis, Domine?'  
 He answered: 'Onwards and always onwards –'  
 And vanished;  
 Taken away from the earthly realm,  
 He left me here behind.  
 Hours later I found  
 Myself at the foot of this tombstone  
 Sobbing, shattered and no longer  
 Knowing  
 Where I was and who I am.  
 Then came the beggar  
 And his human words  
 Roused me once again to earthly existence.  
 OCTAVIA, AUGUSTA, JULIA [*together*]: Quo vadis, Domine?  
 PETER: Back to Rome,  
 Back to the cross,  
 Back to the death  
 Which I wanted to escape.

[*Dawn begins and the first signs of  
 the rising Sun shine over the scenery.*]  
 PETER [*going from the Women to the kneeling Beggar*]:  
 Give me the bread  
 From your pouch.  
 It is hallowed,  
 For the Lord has transformed you  
 And made your body  
 Into His table.  
 BEGGAR: Here is the bread.  
 With it I give myself  
 To you.  
 From now on  
 I want to die  
 And not waste my existence  
 In the land of the dead.  
 I want to feed them  
 With light  
 And not with darkness.  
 PETER [*while holding the beggar's bread in his  
 outstretched hands*]:  
 Death is the bread of this existence.  
 As long as we take nourishment  
 We die.  
 We nourish ourselves on bread,  
 To run away from death.  
 But the ransom money becomes  
 The farthing  
 Which opens to us the gate of dying.  
 OCTAVIA: The bread is hallowed.  
 AUGUSTA: The food transformed.  
 JULIA: Death overcome.  
 PETER: Yes, sisters, come,  
 I want to go with you back  
 To Rome.

The Sun's shining radiance rises

Up

And brightens the new day.

Now I can go to die,

For the bread

Has become life-bestowing medicine.

*[He breaks the bread, eats from it and divides  
the rest among the three women and the Beggar.*

*They stand and eat the food handed to them.]*

PETER: The bread of death

Has become the Resurrection Body

OCTAVIA, AUGUSTA, JULIA [*to Peter*]: Quo vadis, Domine?

PETER: To death in the Lord.

ALL [*turning towards Rome*]: In Christo Morimur.