

transcendence of those who know how to *recognize* that transcendence? Why such implacable hostility to those who try to advance the understanding of the work of art and of aesthetic experience, if not because the very ambition to produce a scientific analysis of that *individuum ineffabile* and of the *individuum ineffabile* who produced it, constitutes a mortal threat to the pretension, so common (at least among art lovers) and yet so ‘distinguished’, of thinking of oneself as an ineffable individual, capable of ineffable experiences of that ineffable? Why, in short, such *resistance to analysis*, if not because it inflicts upon ‘creators’, and upon those who seek to identify with them by a ‘creative’ reading, the last and perhaps the worst of those wounds inflicted, according to Freud, upon narcissism, after those going under the names of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud himself?

Is it legitimate to invoke the experience of the lover, to make of love, as an astonished abandon to the work grasped in its inexpressible singularity, the only form of understanding which accords with the work of art? And to see in the scientific analysis of art, and of the love of art, the form *par excellence* of scientific arrogance, which, under cover of explaining, does not hesitate to threaten the ‘creator’ and the reader in their liberty and their singularity? Against all those defenders of the unknowable, bent on manning the impregnable ramparts of human liberty against the encroachments of science, I would oppose this very Kantian thought of Goethe’s, which all natural scientists and social scientists could claim as their own: ‘Our opinion is that it well becomes man to assume that there is something unknowable, but that he does not have to set any limit to his inquiry.’<sup>7</sup> I think that Kant expresses well the image that scientists have of their enterprise when he suggests that the reconciliation of knowing and being is a sort of *focus imaginarius*, the imaginary from which science must measure itself without ever being able to reach it (despite the illusions of absolute knowledge and the end of history, more common among philosophers than among scientists ... ). As for the threat that science might pose to the liberty and singularity of the literary experience, it suffices, to do justice to the matter, to observe that the ability, procured by science, to explain and understand that experience – and thus to give oneself the possibility of a genuine freedom from one’s determinations – is offered to all those who want to and can appropriate it.

A more legitimate fear might be that science, in putting the love of art under its scalpel, might succeed in killing pleasure, and that, capable of delivering understanding, it might be unable to convey feeling. So one can only approve of an effort like that of Michel Chaillou, when – basing himself on the primacy of feeling, or emotional experience, of *aisthesis* – he offers a literary evocation of the literary life, strangely missing from the ‘literary’ histories of literature.<sup>8</sup> By contriving to reintroduce into an apparently self-contained literary space what one may call, with Schopenhauer, the *parerga et paralipomena*, the neglected ‘margins’ of the text, all that ordinary commentators leave aside, and by evoking, by the magic virtue of nomination, that which made (and was) the life of authors – the humble domestic details, picturesque if not grotesque or ‘crotresque’ [squalid], of their existence amid its most ordinary setting – he subverts the ordinary hierarchy of literary interests. Armed with all the resources of erudition, not in order to contribute to the sacralizing celebration of the classics, to the cult of ancestors and of the ‘gift of the dead’, but to summon and prepare the reader to ‘clink glasses with the dead’, as Saint-Amant said, Chaillou thus tears fetishized texts and authors from the sanctuary of History and academicism, and sets them free.

How could the sociologist, who must also break with idealism and literary hagiography, not feel an affinity with this ‘carefree knowledge’ [*gai savoir*], which relies on the free associations made possible by a liberated and liberating usage of historical references in order to repudiate the prophetic pomp of the grand critiques of authors and the sacerdotal droning of scholarly tradition? However, contrary to what the common image of sociology might lead one to believe, the sociologist cannot be completely content with the literary evocation of literary life. If attention to the perceptible is perfectly suitable when applied to the text, it does lead to neglect of the essential when it bears on the social world within which the text is produced. The task of bringing authors and their environments back to life could be that of a sociologist, and there is no shortage of analyses of art and literature whose purpose is the reconstruction of a social ‘reality’ that can be understood in the visible, the tangible, and the concrete solidity of daily experience. But, as I shall try to demonstrate throughout this book, the sociologist – close in this respect to the philosopher according to Plato – stands opposed to ‘the friend of beautiful spectacles and voices’ that the writer also is: the ‘reality’ that he tracks cannot be reduced to the immediate