MULTIPLICITY

Let us begin with a quotation, from the novel *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* by Carlo Emilio Gadda:

"Nella sua *saggezza* e nella sua povertà molisana, il dottor Ingravallo, che pareva vivere di silenzio e di sonno sotto la giungla nera di quella parrucca, lucida come pece e riccioluta come d'agnello d'Astrakan, nella sua *saggezza* interrompeva talora codesto sonno e silenzio per enunciare qualche teoretica idea (idea generale s'intende) sui casi degli uomini: e delle donne. A prima vista, cioè al primo udirle, sembravano banalità. Non erano banalità. Così quei rapidi enunciati, che facevano sulla sua bocca il crepitio improvviso d'uno zolfanello illuminatore, rivivevano poi nei timpani della gente a distanza di ore, o di mesi, dalla enunciazione: come dopo un misterioso tempo incubatorio. 'Già!' riconosceva l'interessato: 'il dottor Ingravallo me l'aveva pur detto.' Sosteneva, fra l'altro, che le inopinate catastrofi non sono mai la conseguenza o l'effetto che dir si voglia d'un unico motivo, d'una causa al singolare: ma sono come un vortice, un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo, verso cui hanno cospirato tutta una molteplicità di causali convergenti. Diceva anche nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio, o gnommero, che alla romana vuol dire gomitolo. Ma il termine giuridico 'le causali, la causale' gli sfuggiva preferentemente di bocca: quasi contro sua voglia. L'opinione che bisognasse 'riformare in noi il senso della catego-

ria di causa' quale avevamo dai filosofi, da Aristotele o da Emmanuele Kant, e sostituire alla causa le cause era in lui una opinione centrale e persistente: una fissazione, quasi: che gli evaporava dalle labbra carnose, ma piuttosto bianche, dove un mozzicone di sigaretta spenta pareva, pencolando da un angolo, accompagnare la sonnolenza dello sguardo e il quasi-ghigno, tra amaro e scettico, a cui per 'vecchia' abitudine soleva atteggiare la metà inferiore della faccia, sotto quel sonno della fronte e delle palpebre e quel nero piceo della parrucca. Così, proprio così, avveniva dei 'suoi' delitti. 'Quanno me chiammeno! ... Già. Si me chiammeno a me ... può sta ssicure ch'è nu guaio: quacche gliuommero ... de sberretà ...' diceva, contaminando napolitano, molisano, e italiano.

"La causale apparente, la causale principe, era sì, una. Ma il fattaccio era l'effetto di tutta una rosa di causali che gli eran soffiate addosso a molinello (come i sedici venti della rosa dei venti quando s'avviluppano a tromba in una depressione ciclonica) e avevano finito per strizzare nel vortice del delitto la debilitata 'ragione del mondo.' Come si storce il collo a un pollo. E poi soleva dire, ma questo un po' stancamente, 'ch'i' femmene se retroveno addo' n'i vuò truvà.' Una, tarda redizione italica del vieto 'cherchez la femme.' E poi pareva pentirsi, come d'aver calunniato 'e femmene, e voler mutare idea. Ma allora si sarebbe andati nel difficile. Sicché taceva pensieroso, come temendo d'aver detto troppo. Voleva significare che un certo movente affettivo, un tanto o, direste oggi, un quanto di affettività, un certo 'quanto di erotìa', si mescolava anche ai 'casi d'interesse,' ai delitti apparentemente più lontani dalle tempeste d'amore. Qualche collega un tantino invidioso delle sue trovate, qualche prete più edotto dei molti danni del secolo, alcuni subalterni, certi uscieri, i superiori, sostenevano che leggesse dei libri strani: da cui cavava tutte quelle parole che non vogliono dir nulla, o quasi nulla, ma

servono come non altre ad accileccare gli sprovveduti, gli ignari. Erano questioni un po' da manicomio: una terminologia da medici dei matti. Per la pratica ci vuol altro! I fumi e le filosoficherie son da lasciare ai trattatisti: la pratica dei commissariati e della squadra mobile è tutt'un altro affare: ci vuole della gran pazienza, della gran carità: uno stomaco pur anche a posto: e, quando non traballi tutta la baracca dei taliani, senso di responsabilità e decisione sicura, moderazione civile; già: già: e polso fermo. Di queste obiezioni così giuste lui, don Ciccio, non se ne dava per inteso: seguitava a dormire in piedi, a filosofare a stomaco vuoto, e a fingere di fumare la sua *mezza sigheretta*, regolarmente spenta."

"In his wisdom and in his Molisan poverty, Officer Ingravallo, who seemed to live on silence and sleep under the black jungle of that mop, shiny as pitch and curly as astrakhan lamb, in his wisdom, he sometimes interrupted this silence and this sleep to enunciate some theoretical idea (a general idea, that is) on the affairs of men, and of women. At first sight, or rather, on first hearing, these seemed banalities. They weren't banalities. And so, those rapid declarations, which crackled on his lips like the sudden illumination of a sulphur match, were revived in the ears of people at a distance of hours, or of months, from their enunciation: as if after a mysterious period of incubation. 'That's right!' the person in question admitted, 'That's exactly what Ingravallo said to me.' He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of *a* cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed. He also used words like knot or tangle, or muddle, or *gnommero*, which in Roman dialect means

skein. But the legal term, 'the motive, the motives,' escaped his lips by preference, though as if against his will. The opinion that we must "reform within ourselves the meaning of the category of cause," as handed down by the philosophers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, and replace cause with causes was for him a central, persistent opinion, almost a fixation, which melted from his fleshy, but rather white lips, where the stub of a spent cigarette seemed, dangling from one corner, to accompany the somnolence of his gaze and the quasi-grin, half-bitter, half-skeptical, in which through 'old' habit he would fix the lower half of his face beneath that sleep of his forehead and eyelids and that pitchy black of his mop. This was how, exactly how he defined 'his' crimes. 'When they call me ... Sure. If they call *me*, you can be sure that there's trouble: some mess, some *gliuommero* to untangle,' he would say, garbling his Italian with the dialects of Naples and the Molise.

"The apparent motive, the principal motive *was*, of course, single. But the crime was the effect of a whole list of motives which had blown on it in a whirlwind (like the sixteen winds in the list of winds when they twist together in a tornado, in a cyclonic depression) and had ended by pressing into the vortex of the crime the enfeebled 'reason of the world.' Like wringing the neck of a chicken. And then he used to say, but this a bit wearily, 'you're sure to find skirts where you don't want to find them.' A belated Italian revision of the trite 'cherchez la femme.' And then he seemed to repent, as if he had slandered the ladies, and wanted to change his mind. But that would have got him into difficulties. So he would remain silent and pensive, afraid he had said too much. What he meant was that a certain affective motive, a certain amount or, as you might say today, a quantum of affection, of 'eros,' was also involved even in 'matters of interest,' in crimes which were apparently far removed from the tem-

pests of love. Some colleagues, a tiny bit envious of his intuitions, a few priests, more acquainted with the many evils of our times, some subalterns, clerks, and his superiors too, insisted he read strange books: from which he drew all those words that mean nothing, or almost nothing, but which serve better than others to dazzle the naive, the ignorant. His terminology was for doctors in looneybins. But practical action takes something else! Notions and philosophizing are to be left to scribblers: the practical experience of the police stations and the homicide squad is quite another thing; it takes plenty of patience, and charity, and a strong stomach; and when the whole shooting match of the Italians isn't tottering, a sense of responsibility, prompt decision, civil moderation: yes, yes, and a firm hand. On him, on Don Ciccio, these objections, just as they were, had no effect; he continued to sleep on his feet, philosophize on an empty stomach, and pretend to smoke his half-cigarette which had, always, gone out."*

I wished to begin with this passage from Gadda because it seems to me an excellent introduction to the subject of my lecture—which is the contemporary novel as an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world.

I could have chosen other novelists to exemplify this "calling" so typical of the present century. I chose Gadda because he wrote in my own language and is relatively little known in the United States (partly because of the particular complexity of his style, difficult even in Italian); also because his philosophy fits in very well with my theme, in that he views the world as a "system of

*Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana (Milan: Garzanti, 1957); That Awful Mess on Via Merulana, translated by William Weaver (New York: George Braziller, 1965), pp. 4–6.

"systems," where each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them.

Carlo Emilio Gadda tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn; to represent it without in the least diminishing the inextricable complexity or, to put it better, the simultaneous presence of the most disparate elements that converge to determine every event. He was led to this vision of things by his intellectual training, his temperament as a writer, and his neuroses. As an engineer, Gadda was brought up on the culture of science, equipped with technical know-how and a positive fervor for philosophy. The last of these, incidentally—his passion for philosophy—he kept a secret: it was only among the papers discovered after his death in 1973 that we learned of his rough draft for a philosophical system based on Spinoza and Leibniz. As a writer—thought of as the Italian equivalent to James Joyce—Gadda developed a style to match his complicated epistemology, in that it superimposes various levels of language, high and low, and uses the most varied vocabulary. As a neurotic, Gadda throws the whole of himself onto the page he is writing, with all his anxieties and obsessions, so that often the outline is lost while the details proliferate and fill up the whole picture. What is supposed to be a detective novel is left without a solution. In a sense, all his novels are unfinished or left as fragments, like the ruins of ambitious projects that nevertheless retain traces of the splendor and meticulous care with which they were conceived.

To get an idea of how Gadda's "encyclopedism" works in terms of a finished structure, we should turn to shorter texts, as for example his recipe for "Risotto alla Milanese," which is a masterpiece of Italian prose and practical advice in its descriptions of the grains of rice still partly in their husks ("pericarps," as he calls them), the most appropriate casseroles to use, the

saffron, and the successive phases of cooking. Another text is devoted to building techniques where the use of prestressed concrete and hollow bricks no longer isolates houses either from heat or from noise. There follows a grotesque description both of his life in a modern building and of his obsession with all the noises that assault his ears.

In these brief pieces, as in each episode in one of Gadda's novels, the least thing is seen as the center of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following, multiplying the details so that his descriptions and digressions become infinite. Whatever the starting point, the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing ever vaster horizons, and if it were permitted to go on further and further in every direction, it would end by embracing the entire universe.

The best example of this web radiating out from every object is the episode of finding the stolen jewels in chapter nine of *That Awful Mess*. We are told about every single precious stone, its geological history, its chemical composition, with historical and artistic references and all the possible uses to which it might be put, together with the associations of images that these evoke. The most important critical essay on the epistemology implicit in Gadda's writing, Gian Carlo Roscioni's "La disarmonia prestabilita" (Deliberate Disharmony), begins with an analysis of those five pages on gems. Starting from there, Roscioni explains how for Gadda this knowledge of things—seen as the convergence of infinite relationships, past and future, real or possible—demands that everything should be precisely named, described, and located in space and time. He does this by exploiting the semantic potential of words, of all the varieties of verbal and syntactical forms with their connotations and tones, together with the often comic effects created by their juxtaposition.

A grotesque drollery with moments of frenzied desperation is

characteristic of Gadda's vision. Even before science had officially recognized that observation intervenes in some way to modify the phenomenon being observed, Gadda knew that "conoscere è inserire alcunchè nel reale; e, quindi, deformare il reale" (to know is to insert something into what is real, and hence to distort reality). From this arises his invariably distorting way of representing things, and the tension he always establishes between himself and the thing represented, so that the more the world becomes distorted before his eyes, the more the author's self becomes involved in this process and is itself distorted and confused.

The passion for knowledge therefore carries Gadda from the objectivity of the world to his own irritated subjectivity, and this—for a man who does not like himself, and indeed detests himself—is a fearful torture, as is abundantly demonstrated in his novel *La cognizione del dolore* (Acquainted with Grief). In this most autobiographical of his books, Gadda explodes into a furious invective against the pronoun "I" and indeed against all pronouns, those parasites of thought: "Io, io! ... il più lurido di tutti i pronomi! ... I pronomi! Sono i pidocchi del pensiero. Quando il pensiero ha i pidocchi, si gratta come tutti quelli che hanno i pidocchi ... e nelle unghie, allora ... ci ritrova i pronomi: i pronomi di persona" (I, I! ... the filthiest of all the pronouns! ... The pronouns! They are the lice of thought. When a thought has lice, it scratches, like everyone with lice ... and in your fingernails, then ... you find pronouns: the personal pronouns).

If Gadda's writing is determined by this tension between rational exactitude and frenetic distortion as basic components of every cognitive process, during the same period another writer with a

technical-scientific training, Robert Musil, also an engineer, expressed the tension between mathematical exactitude and the imprecision of human affairs, employing a completely different kind of writing: fluent, ironic, and controlled. Musil's dream was of a mathematics of single solutions:

Aber er hatte noch etwas auf der Zunge gehabt; etwas von mathematischen Aufgaben, die keine allgemeine Lösung zulassen, wohl aber Einzellösungen, durch deren Kombination man sich der allgemeinen Lösung nähert. Er hätte hinzufügen können, dass er die Aufgabe des menschlichen Lebens für eine solche ansah. Was man ein Zeitalter nennt—ohne zu wissen, ob man Jahrhunderte, Jahrtausende oder die Spanne zwischen Schule und Enkelkind darunter verstehen soll—dieser breite, ungeregelte Fluss von Zuständen würde dann ungefähr ebensoviel bedeuten wie ein planloses Nacheinander von ungenügenden und einzeln genommen falschen Lösungsversuchen, aus denen, erst wenn die Menschheit sie zusammenzufassen verstünde, die richtige und totale Lösung hervorgehen könnte. In der Strassenbahn erinnerte er sich auf dem Heimweg daran. (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, I.358)

But there was something else he also had had on the tip of his tongue, something about mathematical problems that did not admit of any general solution, though they did admit of particular solutions, the combination of which could bring one closer to the general solution. He might have added that he regarded the problem set by every human life as one of these. What someone calls an age—without knowing whether he should by that understand centuries, millennia, or the span of time between schooldays and grandparenthood—this broad, unregulated flux of

conditions would then amount to much the same thing as a chaotic succession of unsatisfactory and, when taken singly, false attempts at a solution, attempts that might produce the correct and total solution, but only after men had learned to combine them.

In the tram going home he remembered this.

For Musil, knowledge is the awareness of the incompatibility of two opposite polarities. One of these he calls exactitude—or at other times mathematics, pure spirit, or even the military mentality—while the other he calls soul, or irrationality, humanity, chaos. Everything he knows or thinks he deposits in an encyclopedic book that he tries to keep in the form of a novel, but its structure continually changes; it comes to pieces in his hands. The result is that not only does he never manage to finish the novel, but he never succeeds in deciding on its general outlines or how to contain the enormous mass of material within set limits. If we compare these two engineer-writers, Gadda, for whom understanding meant allowing himself to become tangled in a network of relationships, and Musil, who gives the impression of always understanding everything in the multiplicity of codes and levels of things without ever allowing himself to become involved, we have to record this one fact common to both: their inability to find an ending.

Not even Marcel Proust managed to put an end to his encyclopedic novel, though not for lack of design, since the idea for the book came to him all at once, the beginning and end and the general outline. The reason was that the work grew denser and denser from the inside through its own organic vitality. The network that links all things is also Proust's theme, but in him this net is composed of points in space-time occupied in succession by everyone, which brings about an infinite multiplication of the

dimensions of space and time. The world expands until it can no longer be grasped, and knowledge, for Proust, is attained by suffering this intangibility. In this sense a typical experience of knowledge is the jealousy felt by the narrator for Albertine:

Et je comprenais l'impossibilité où se heurte l'amour. Nous nous imaginons qu'il a pour objet un être qui peut être couché devant nous, enfermé dans un corps. Hélas! Il est l'extension de cet être à tous les points de l'espace et du temps que cet être a occupé et occupera. Si nous ne possédons pas son contact avec tel lieu, avec telle heure, nous ne le possédons pas. Or nous ne pouvons toucher tous ces points. Si encore ils nous étaient désignés, peut-être pourrions-nous nous étendre jusqu'à eux. Mais nous tâtonnons sans les trouver. De là la défiance, la jalousie, les persécutions. Nous perdons un temps précieux sur une piste absurde et nous passons sans le soupçonner à côté du vrai.

And I realised the impossibility which love comes up against. We imagine that it has as its object a being that can be laid down in front of us, enclosed within a body. Alas, it is the extension of that being to all the points in space and time that it has occupied and will occupy. If we do not possess its contact with this or that place, this or that hour, we do not possess that being. But we cannot touch all these points. If only they were indicated to us, we might perhaps contrive to reach out to them. But we grope for them without finding them. Hence mistrust, jealousy, persecutions. We waste precious time on absurd clues and pass by the truth without suspecting it.*

*A la recherche du temps perdu: La prisonnière (Paris: Pléiade, Gallimard, 1954), III.100; Remembrance of Things Past: The Captive, translated by C. K. Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 95.

This passage is on the same page in *The Captive* that deals with the irascible deities who control the telephone. A few pages later we are present at one of the first displays of airplanes, as in the volume before (*Cities of the Plain*) we saw cars replacing carriages, changing the ratio of space to time to such an extent that "l'art en est aussi modifié" (art is also changed by it). I say all this to show that, in his awareness of technology, Proust does not fall short of the two engineer-writers I mentioned earlier. The advent of modern technology that we see emerging little by little in the *Remembrance* is not just part of the "color of the times," but part of the work's very form, of its inner logic, of the author's anxiety to plumb the multiplicity of the writable within the briefness of life that consumes it.

In my first lecture I started with the epic poems of Lucretius and Ovid, and with the idea of a system of infinite relationships between *everything* and *everything else* that is to be found in two such different books. In this lecture I think that references to literature of the past may be reduced to a minimum, with just a few to show that in our own times literature is attempting to realize this ancient desire to represent the multiplicity of relationships, both in effect and in potentiality.

Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

One writer who most certainly placed no limitations on the ambitiousness of his projects was Goethe, who in 1780 confided to Charlotte von Stein that he was planning a "novel about the universe." We know next to nothing about how he intended to lend substance to this notion, but the very fact that he chose the novel as the literary form that might contain the whole universe is itself a fact laden with significance for the future. At more or less the same time, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg wrote: "I think that a poem about empty space would be sublime." The universe and the void: I shall return to these two terms, which often tend to become one and the same thing, but between which the target of literature swings back and forth.

I found these quotations from Goethe and Lichtenberg in a marvelous book by Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (The Legibility of the World, 1981). In the last few chapters the author follows the history of this literary ambition from Novalis, who sets out to write the "ultimate book," which at one moment is a sort of encyclopedia and at others a Bible, to Humboldt, who with his *Kosmos* actually achieved his aim of writing a "description of the physical universe." The chapter in Blumenberg that concerns my subject most directly is the one called "The Empty Book of the World," which deals with Mallarmé and Flaubert. I have always been fascinated by the fact that Mallarmé, who in his poems succeeded in giving a uniquely crystalline form to nothingness, devoted the last years of his life to the project of writing the Absolute Book, as the ultimate goal of the universe: a mysterious work of which he destroyed every trace. In the same way, it is fascinating to think about Flaubert, who on 16 January 1852 wrote to Louise Colet, "ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien" (what I'd like to do is a book about nothing), and then went on to devote the last ten years of his life to the most encyclopedic novel ever written, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.

Bouvard and Pécuchet is truly the ancestor of the novels I shall mention this evening, even if the pathetic and exhilarating voyage through the seas of universal knowledge taken by these two Don Quixotes of nineteenth-century scientism turns out to be a series of shipwrecks. For these two self-taught innocents, each book throws open a new world, but the worlds are mutually exclusive or at least are so contradictory as to destroy any hope of certainty. However much effort they put into it, the two scriveners are lacking in the kind of subjective gift that enables one to adapt ideas to the use one wishes to put them to, or to the gratuitous pleasure that one wishes to derive from them, a gift that cannot be learned from books.

There is a question as to how we should interpret the end of this unfinished novel, with Bouvard and Pécuchet giving up the idea of understanding the world, resignation to their fate as scriveners, and the decision to devote themselves to the task of copying the books in the universal library. Should we conclude that in the experience of Bouvard and Pécuchet "encyclopedia" and "nothingness" fuse together? But behind the two characters there is Flaubert himself, who in order to nourish their adventures chapter by chapter is forced to acquire a knowledge of everything that can be known and to build up an edifice of science for his two heroes to knock down. To this end he reads manuals of agriculture and horticulture, chemistry, anatomy, medicine, geology. In a letter dated August 1873 he said that with this aim, and taking notes all the while, he had read 194 books; in June 1874 the figure had risen to 294; and five years later he was able to announce to Zola: "Mes lectures sont finies et je n'ouvre plus aucun bouquin jusqu'à la termination de mon roman" (My readings are finished and I won't open another old book until my novel is done). But in his letters shortly afterwards we find him coming to grips with ecclesiastical texts and then turning to

pedagogy, a discipline that forces him to start out on the most diverse branches of knowledge. In January 1880 he wrote: "Savez-vous à combien se montent les volumes qu'il m'a fallu absorber pour mes deux bonhommes? A plus de 1500!" (Do you know how many volumes I've had to absorb on behalf of my two worthy friends? More than 1500!).

The encyclopedic epic of the two self-educated scriveners is therefore *doublée* by a parallel and absolutely titanic effort achieved in the realm of reality. It is Flaubert in person who is transforming himself into an encyclopedia of the universe, assimilating with a passion in no way inferior to that of his heroes every scrap of the knowledge that they sought to make their own, and all that they are destined to be excluded from. Did he toil so long to demonstrate the vanity of knowledge as exploited by his two self-educated heroes? ("Du défaut de méthode dans les sciences" [On Lack of Method in the Sciences] is the subtitle Flaubert wanted to give his novel, as we see from a letter of 16 December 1879.) Or was it to demonstrate the vanity of knowledge pure and simple?

An encyclopedic novelist of a century later, Raymond Queneau, wrote an essay to defend the two heroes from the accusation of *bêtise* (their crime was being "épris d'absolu," in love with the absolute, allowing no contradictions or doubts), and also to defend Flaubert of the oversimplified accusation that he was an enemy of science. "Flaubert est *pour* la science," says Queneau, "dans la mesure justement où celle-ci est sceptique, réservée, méthodique, prudente, humaine. Il a horreur des dogmatiques, des métaphysiciens, des philosophes" (Flaubert is *for* science in exactly the extent to which it is skeptical, reserved, methodical, prudent, human. He has a horror of dogmaticians, metaphysicians, and philosophers).

Flaubert's skepticism and his endless curiosity about the hu-

man knowledge accumulated over the centuries are the very qualities that were destined to be claimed for their own by the greatest writers of the twentieth century. But theirs I would tend to call an active skepticism, a kind of gambling and betting in a tireless effort to establish relationships between discourse, methods, and levels of meaning. Knowledge as multiplicity is the thread that binds together the major works both of what is called modernism and of what goes by the name of the *postmodern*, a thread—over and above all the labels attached to it—that I hope will continue into the next millennium.

Let us remember that the book many call the most complete introduction to the culture of our century is itself a novel: Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. It is not too much to say that the small, enclosed world of an alpine sanatorium is the starting point for all the threads that were destined to be followed by the *maîtres à penser* of the century: all the subjects under discussion today were heralded and reviewed there.

What tends to emerge from the great novels of the twentieth century is the idea of an *open* encyclopedia, an adjective that certainly contradicts the noun *encyclopedia*, which etymologically implies an attempt to exhaust knowledge of the world by enclosing it in a circle. But today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold.

Medieval literature tended to produce works expressing the sum of human knowledge in an order and form of stable compactness, as in the *Commedia*, where a multiform richness of language converges with the application of a systematic and unitary mode of thought. In contrast, the modern books that we love most are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of a multiplicity of interpretative methods, modes of thought, and styles of expression. Even if the overall design has been minutely planned, what matters is not the enclosure of the work within a harmo-

nious figure, but the centrifugal force produced by it—a plurality of languages as a guarantee of a truth that is not merely partial. This is proved by the two great writers of our century who really paid attention to the Middle Ages, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, both of them students of Dante and both equipped with a profound consciousness of theology (though with quite different intentions). Eliot dissolves the theological pattern into the lightness of irony and in dizzying verbal magic. Joyce sets out with every intention of constructing a systematic and encyclopedic work that can be interpreted on various levels according to medieval exegetics (drawing up tables of the correspondences of the various chapters of *Ulysses* with the parts of the human body, the arts, colors, and symbols), though what he achieves above all, chapter by chapter in *Ulysses*, is an encyclopedia of styles, weaving polyphonic multiplicity into the verbal texture of *Finnegans Wake*.

It is time to put a little order into the suggestions I have put forward as examples of multiplicity. There is such a thing as the unified text that is written as the expression of a single voice, but that reveals itself as open to interpretation on several levels. Here the prize for an inventive tour-de-force goes to Alfred Jarry for *L'amour absolu* (1899), a fifty-page novel that can be read as three completely different stories: (1) the vigil of a condemned man in his cell the night before his execution; (2) the monologue of a man suffering from insomnia, who when half asleep dreams that he has been condemned to death; (3) the story of Christ. Then there is the manifold text, which replaces the oneness of a thinking "I" with a multiplicity of subjects, voices, and views of the world, on the model of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "dialogic" or "polyphonic" or "carnivalesque," tracing its antecedents from Plato through Rabelais to Dostoevsky.

There is the type of work that, in the attempt to contain everything possible, does not manage to take on a form, to create outlines for itself, and so remains incomplete by its very nature, as we saw in the cases of Gadda and Musil.

There is the type of work that in literature corresponds to what in philosophy is nonsystematic thought, which proceeds by aphorisms, by sudden, discontinuous flashes of light; and at this point the time has come to mention an author I never tire of reading, Paul Valéry. I am speaking of his prose work composed of essays of only a few pages and notes a few lines long, found in his notebooks. "Une philosophie doit être portative" (A philosophy should be portable), he wrote (Cahiers, XXIV.713), but also: "J'ai cherché, je cherche et chercherai pour ce que je nomme le Phénomène Total, c'est-à-dire le Tout de la conscience, des relations, des conditions, des possibilités, des impossibilités" (I have sought, I am searching, and I will search for what I call the Total Phenomenon, that is, the Totality of conscience, relations, conditions, possibilities, and impossibilities; XII.722).

Among the values I would like to pass on to the next millennium, there is this above all: a literature that has absorbed the taste for mental orderliness and exactitude, the intelligence of poetry, but at the same time that of science and of philosophy: an intelligence such as that of Valéry as an essayist and prose writer. (And if I mention Valéry in a context in which the names of novelists prevail, it is partly because, though he was not a novelist and indeed—thanks to a famous quip of his—was thought of as the official liquidator of traditional fiction, he was a critic who understood novels as no one else could, defining their specificity simply as novels.)

If I had to say which fiction writer has perfectly achieved Valéry's aesthetic ideal of exactitude in imagination and in language, creating works that match the rigorous geometry of the

crystal and the abstraction of deductive reasoning, I would without hesitation say Jorge Luis Borges. The reasons for my fondness for Borges do not end here, but I will mention only the main ones. I love his work because every one of his pieces contains a model of the universe or of an attribute of the universe (infinity, the innumerable, time eternal or present or cyclic); because they are texts contained in only a few pages, with an exemplary economy of expression; because his stories often take the outer form of some genre from popular literature, a form proved by long usage, which creates almost mythical structures. As an example let us take his most vertiginous "essay" on time, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" (The Garden of Forking Paths), which is presented as a spy story and includes a totally logico-metaphysical story, which in turn contains the description of an endless Chinese novel—and all this concentrated into a dozen pages.

The hypotheses on the subject of time enunciated by Borges in this story, each one contained (and virtually hidden) in a handful of lines, are as follows. First there is an idea of precise time, almost an absolute, subjective present: "reflexioné que todas las cosas le suceden a uno precisamente, precisamente ahora. Siglos de siglos y sólo en el presente ocurren los hechos; innumerables hombres en el aire, en la tierra y el mar, y todo lo que realmente pasa me pasa a mí" (I reflected that everything, to everyone, happens precisely, precisely now. Century after century, and only in the present, do things happen. There are innumerable men in the air, on land and on sea, and everything that really happens, happens to me). Then there is a notion of time as determined by the will, in which the future appears to be as irrevocable as the past; and finally the central idea of the whole story—a manifold and ramified time in which every present forks out into two futures, so as to form "una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos

"divergentes, convergentes y paralelos" (a growing and bewildering network of divergent, convergent, and parallel forms of time). This idea of infinite contemporary universes in which all possibilities are realized in all possible combinations is by no means a digression in the story, but rather the very reason why the protagonist feels authorized to carry out the absurd and abominable crime imposed on him by his spy mission, perfectly sure that this happens only in one of the universes but not in the others; and indeed that, if he commits this crime here and now, in other universes he and his victim will be able to hail each other as friends and brothers.

The scheme of the network of possibilities may be condensed into the few pages of a story by Borges, or it may be made the supporting structure of immensely long novels, in which density and concentration are present in the individual parts. But I would say that today the rule of "Keep It Short" is confirmed even by long novels, the structure of which is accumulative, modular, and combinatory.

These considerations are at the basis of what I call the "hyper-novel," which I tried to exemplify in *If on a winter's night a traveler* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*). My aim was to give the essence of what a novel is by providing it in concentrated form, in ten beginnings; each beginning develops in very different ways from a common nucleus, and each acts within a framework that both determines and is determined. The same principle, to sample the potential multiplicity of what may be narrated, forms the basis of another of my books, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, which is intended to be a kind of machine for multiplying narratives that start from visual elements with many possible meanings, such as a tarot pack. My temperament prompts me to "keep it short," and such structures as these enable me to unite density of invention and expression with a sense of infinite possibilities.

Another example of the hyper-novel is *La vie mode d'emploi* (Life, Directions for Use) by Georges Perec. It is a very long novel, made up of many intersecting stories (it is no accident that its subtitle is *Romans*, in the plural), and it reawakens the pleasure of reading the great novelistic cycles of the sort Balzac wrote. In my view, this book, published in Paris in 1978, four years before the author died at the early age of forty-six, is the last real "event" in the history of the novel so far. There are many reasons for this: the plan of the book, of incredible scope but at the same time solidly finished; the novelty of its rendering; the compendium of a narrative tradition and the encyclopedic summa of things known that lend substance to a particular image of the world; the feeling of "today" that is made from accumulations of the past and the vertigo of the void; the continual presence of anguish and irony together—in a word, the manner in which the pursuit of a definite structural project and the imponderable element of poetry become one and the same thing.

The element of "puzzle" gives the novel its plot and its formal scheme. Another scheme is the cross-section view of a typical Parisian apartment house, in which the entire action takes place, one chapter to each room. There are five storeys of apartments for each of which we are told about the furnishings and fittings, the changes of ownership and the lives of the inhabitants, together with their ancestors and descendants. The plan of the building is like a bi-square of ten squares by ten, a chessboard on which Perec passes from one pigeonhole (room, chapter) to another as the knight moves in chess, but according to a scheme that enables him to land on each of the squares in turn. (So are there a hundred chapters? No, only ninety-nine. This ultra-completed book has an intentional loophole left for incompleteness.)

So much for the container of things. As for the content, Perec

drew up lists of themes, divided into categories, and decided that, even if barely hinted at, one theme from each category ought to appear in each chapter, in such a way as constantly to vary the combinations according to mathematical procedures that I am not able to define, though I have no doubts as to their exactitude. (I used to visit Perec during the nine years in which he worked on the novel, but I know only a few of his secret rules.) These categories number no fewer than forty-two and include literary quotations, geographical locations, historical facts, furniture, objects, styles, colors, foodstuffs, animals, plants, minerals, and who knows what else—and I have no idea how he managed to respect all these rules, which he did even in the shortest and most compressed chapters.

In order to escape the arbitrary nature of existence, Perec, like his protagonist, is forced to impose rigorous rules and regulations on himself, even if these rules are in turn arbitrary. But the miracle is that this system of poetics, which might seem artificial and mechanical, produces inexhaustible freedom and wealth of invention. This is because it coincides with something that had been Perec's passion ever since his first novel (*Les choses*, 1965): a passion for catalogues, for the enumeration of objects, each defined both in itself and by its belonging to an epoch, a style, a society; a passion extending to menus, concert programs, diet charts, bibliographies real or imaginary.

The demon of "collectionism" is always beating its wings over Perec's pages, and of the many collections conjured up by this book the one that is most personal and "his," I would say, is a passion for the *unique*, that is, the collection of objects of which only one specimen exists. Yet a collector he was not, in life, except of words, of the data of knowledge, of things remembered. Terminological exactitude was his way of possessing things. Perec collected and gave a name to whatever comprises

the uniqueness of every event, person, or thing. No one was ever more immune than Perec to the worst blight in modern writing—which is vagueness.

I would like to stress the fact that for Perec the construction of a novel according to fixed rules, to constraints, by no means limited his freedom as a storyteller, but stimulated it. It was no coincidence that Perec was the most inventive of the members of Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature), founded by his mentor Raymond Queneau. Many years earlier, when he was quarreling with the automatic writing of the surrealists, Queneau wrote:

Une autre bien fausse idée qui a également cours actuellement, c'est l'équivalence que l'on établit entre inspiration, exploration du subconscient et libération, entre hasard, automatisme et liberté. Or, *cette* inspiration qui consiste à obéir aveuglément à toute impulsion est en réalité un esclavage. Le classique qui écrit sa tragédie en observant un certain nombre de régles qu'il connaît est plus libre que le poète qui écrit ce qui lui passe par la tête et qui est l'esclave d'autres règles qu'il ignore.

Another very wrong idea that is also going the rounds at the moment is the equivalence that has been established between inspiration, exploration of the subconscious, and liberation, between chance, automatism, and freedom. Now this sort of inspiration, which consists in blindly obeying every impulse, is in fact slavery. The classical author who wrote his tragedy observing a certain number of known rules is freer than the poet who writes down whatever comes into his head and is slave to other rules of which he knows nothing.

I have come to the end of this apologia for the novel as a vast net. Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the *self* of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

But perhaps the answer that stands closest to my heart is something else: Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the *self*, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic . . . . . .

Was this not perhaps what Ovid was aiming at, when he wrote about the continuity of forms? And what Lucretius was aiming at when he identified himself with that nature common to each and every thing?