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I will start by explaining what my title means—and first of all what it does not mean. The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events or the social structure and the social struggles in their books. The syntagma "politics of literature" means that literature "does" politics as literature—that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing.

To make sense of this statement, I will first briefly spell out the idea of politics that is involved in it. Politics is commonly viewed as the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas. Now, such enactments or embodiments imply that you are taken into account as subjects sharing in a common world, making statements and not simply noise, discussing things located in a common world and not in your own fantasy. What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.

The politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world.

Now the point is: what is meant by "literature as literature"? Surprisingly, few among the political or social commentators of literature have paid attention to literature's own historicity. We know, however, that classifying the art of writing under the notion of "literature" is not old. We can trace it back to approximately the beginning of the nineteenth century. But critics have not often deduced any consequence from this. Some of them have tried desperately to connect literature (taken as the a-historical name of the art of writing in general) with politics conceived as a historical set of forces, events and issues. Others have tried to give

a specific content to the notion of literature. Unfortunately this was done on a very weak basis, by referring literature's modernity to the search for an intransitive language. On this basis, the connection was initially flawed. Either there was no way of binding together literary intransitivity and political action, with "art for art's sake" opposed to political commitment, or one had to assume a quite obscure relationship between literary intransitivity (conceived of as the materialistic primacy of the signifier) and the materialistic rationality of revolutionary politics. Sartre proposed a kind of gentleman's agreement, by opposing the intransitivity of poetry to the transitivity of prose writing. Poets, he assumed, used words as things, and had no commitment to the political use of communicative speech. Prose writers, by contrast, used words as tools of communication and were automatically committed to the framing of a common world. But the distinction proved to be inconsistent. After having attributed the opposition to the very distinction of two states of language, Sartre had to explain why prose writers like Flaubert used words in the same "intransitive" way as did poets. And he had to pursue endlessly the reason for this, both in the sad realities of class struggle in the 1850s and in the neurosis of the young Gustave Flaubert. In other words, he had to pursue outside of literature a political commitment of literature, which he had first purported to ground on its own linguistic specificity. It is not a casual or a personal failure. In fact, the identification of literature with a specific state or use of language has no real linguistic relevance, and it cannot ground any specificity of literature or its political involvement. Moreover, it proves very ambiguous in its practical use, and we have to deal with this ambiguity if we want to move forward in understanding literature as a new system of the art of writing, as well as its relationship to the political partition of the sensible.

I would highlight this point by comparing two political readings of the same novelist, taken to be the embodiment of "art for art's sake" and the autonomy of literature. I have just referred to Sartre's analysis of Flaubert. From his point of view, Flaubert was the champion of an aristocratic assault against the democratic nature of prose language. He used prose's transparency of words to create a new form of opacity. As Sartre put it, "Flaubert surrounds the object, seizes it, immobilizes it and breaks its back, changes into stone and petrifies the object as well." Sartre explained this petrification as the contribution of bourgeois writers to the strategy of their class. Flaubert, Mallarmé and their colleagues purported to challenge the bourgeois way of thinking, and they dreamt of a new aristocracy, living in a world of pure words, conceived of as a secret garden of precious stones and flowers. But their private paradise was nothing but the celestial projection of the essence of private ownership. In order to shape it, they had to tear words away from those who could have used them as tools of social debate and struggle.

So the literary petrification of words and objects went along with the bourgeois anti-democratic strategy.

But the argument of "petrification of the language" had a long history. Long before Sartre, the same argument had been made by contemporary commentators of Flaubert. They pointed out in Flaubert's prose a fascination for detail and an indifference toward the human meaning of actions and characters that led him to give the same importance to material things and to human beings. Barbey d'Aurevilly summed up their criticism by saying that Flaubert was carrying his sentences just as a worker carries his stones before him in a wheelbarrow. All of them agreed that his prose was the petrification of human action and human language. And all of them, like Sartre a century later, thought that this petrification was not a mere literary device, that it carried a deep political significance. Now the point is that the nineteenth-century critics understood this differently. For them, petrification was the symptom of democracy. Flaubert's disregard for any difference between high and low subject matters, for any hierarchy between foreground and background, and ultimately between men and things, was the hallmark of democracy. Indeed, Flaubert had no political commitment. He despised equally democrats and conservatives, and assumed that the writer should be unwilling to prove anything on any matter. But even that attitude of "non-commitment" was for those commentators the mark of democracy. What is democracy, if not the equal ability to be democrat, anti-democrat or indifferent to both democracy and anti-democracy ? Whatever Flaubert might think about the common people and the republican form of government, his prose was the embodiment of democracy.

There would be little point in proving that Sartre mistook a reactionary argument for a revolutionary argument. It is more relevant to have a closer look at the link between the "indifference" of a way of writing and the opposite statements it allows for. It appears that three things are bound together: a way of writing without "meaning" anything, a way of reading this writing as a symptom that has to be interpreted, and two opposite ways of making this political reading. I would like to show that this very link between a way of writing, a way of reading and two ways of interpreting can lead us to the core of the question. The "indifference" of writing, the practice of symptomatic reading and the political ambiguity of that reading are woven in the same fabric. And this fabric might be literature as such: literature conceived neither as the art of writing in general nor as a specific state of the language, but as a historical mode of visibility of writing, a specific link between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things.

This mode of visibility involves a specific system of the efficiency of words, which dismisses another system. The contrasting of "literature" as such, literature

as the modern regime of the art of writing, to the old world of representation and "belles-lettres" is not the opposition between two states of the language. Nor is it an opposition between the servitude of *mimesis* and the autonomy of self-referential writing. It is the opposition of two ways of linking meaning and action, of framing the relation between the sayable and the visible, of enabling words with the power of framing a common world. It is an opposition between two ways of doing things with words.

This is what was involved in the criticism made by the French champions of the old literary regime, not only against Flaubert, but against all the new writers: they had lost the sense of human action and human meaning. For us, this means that they had lost the sense of a certain kind of "action" and of a certain way of understanding the link between action and meaning. What was that sense? In order to understand it, we have to remember the old Aristotelian principle that sustained the edifice of representation. Poetry, Aristotle assumed, is not a specific use of language. Poetry is fiction. And fiction is an imitation of acting men. We know that this poetic principle also was a political principle. It set forth a hierarchy opposing the causal rationality of actions to the empiricism of life as it unfolds. Poetry, Aristotle said, is more "philosophical" than history, because poetry builds causal plots binding events together in a whole, while history only tells the events, as they evolve. The privilege of action over life distinguished noble poetry from base history, to the extent that it distinguished those who act from those who do nothing but "live," who are enclosed in the sphere of reproductive and meaning-less life. As a consequence, fiction was divided into different genres of imitations. There were high genres, devoted to the imitation of noble actions and characters, and low genres devoted to common people and base subject matters. The hierarchy of genres also submitted style to a principle of hierarchical convenience: kings had to act and speak as kings do, and common people as common people do. The convention was not simply an academic constraint. There was a homology between the rationality of poetic fiction and the intelligibility of human actions, conceived of as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.

From that point of view we can figure out, at first sight, what upset the defenders of the *belles-lettres* in the works of the new writers. It was the dismissal of any principle of hierarchy among the characters and subject matters, of any principle of appropriateness between a style and a subject matter. The new principle was stated in all its crudity by Flaubert: there are no high or low subject matters. Further, there is no subject matter at all, because style is an absolute way of seeing things. This absolutization of style may have been identified afterwards with an a-political or aristocratic position. But in Flaubert's time, it could only be interpreted as a radical egalitarian principle, upsetting the whole

system of representation, the old regime of the art of writing. It turned upside down a certain normality, put as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. The new principle broke that adequation. The "aristocratic" absolutization of style went along with the "democratic" principle of indifference. It went along with the reversal of the old hierarchy between noble action and base life.

On that ground we could easily construct a politics of literature, contrasting the egalitarian principle of indifference to the hierarchical law of the old regime. Such a "politics of literature" could square with de Tocqueville's idea of democracy, conceived as the "equality of conditions." But we cannot end matters that easily. Democracy is more than a social state. It is a specific partition of the sensible, a specific regime of speaking whose effect is to upset any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being. It is in this sense that literature opposed its "democracy" to the representational hierarchy. When Voltaire accounted for the power of Corneille's tragedies, he made a significant argument. He said that his tragedies were performed in front of an audience made of orators, magistrates, preachers and generals. He meant an audience made of people for whom speaking was the same as acting. Unfortunately, he assumed, the audience of his own time was no longer composed of those specialists of the acting word. Is was only made, he said, of "a number of young gentlemen and young ladies." That meant anybody, nobody, no addressee. The representational regime of writing was based on a definite idea of the speech-act. Writing was speaking. And speaking was viewed as the act of the orator who is persuading the popular assembly (even though there was no popular assembly). It was viewed as the act of the preacher uplifting souls or the general haranguing his troops. The representational power of doing art with words was bound up with the power of a social hierarchy based on the capacity of addressing appropriate kinds of speech-acts to appropriate kinds of audiences.

Flaubert and his peers, on the contrary, addressed the audience stigmatized by Voltaire: a number of young ladies and young gentlemen. Literature is this new regime of writing in which the writer is anybody and the reader anybody. This is why its sentences are "mute pebbles." They are mute in the sense that they had been uttered long ago by Plato when he contrasted the wandering of the orphan letter to the living logos, planted by a master as a seed in the soul of a disciple, where it could grow and live. The "mute letter" was the letter that went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not. The "mute" letter was a letter that spoke too much and endowed anyone at all with the

power of speaking. In my book *The Names of History,* I proposed to give the name of "literariness" to this availability of the so-called "mute letter" that determines a partition of the perceptible in which one can no longer contrast those who speak and those who only make noise, those who act and those who only live. Such was the democratic revolution pinpointed by the reactionary critics. The Flaubertian aristocracy of style was originally tied to the democracy of the mute letter, meaning the letter that anybody can retrieve and use in his or her way.

Literature discovers at its core this link with the democratic disorder of literariness. Literature is the art of writing that specifically addresses those who *should not* read. This paradoxical relationship is the subject matter of many nineteenth-century works. I will take as a telling case Balzac's novel *The Country Parson,* which is, strictly speaking, a fable of democracy as literariness. The novel recounts the disaster caused by one single event: the reading of a book by somebody who should never have read one. It is the story of a young girl, Veronique, the daughter of an ironmonger. She lives in the lower end of the small provincial town of Limoges, in an atmosphere of labor, religion and chastity. One day, as Veronique is strolling with her parents, she sees on display in a bookseller's shop a book adorned with a nice engraving. It is *Paul et Virginie,* a novel famed for its childlike innocence. She buys the book and reads it. And everything goes wrong: the pure and chaste book in the hands and mind of the pure and chaste girl becomes the most dangerous poison. From that day on, Veronique enters a new life, carried away, Balzac writes, by "the cult of the Ideal, that fatal religion." She dreams of meeting her Paul and living with him a life of pure and chaste love. Disaster ensues. Veronique, become rich, enters a loveless marriage with a banker of the town. As a wealthy patron, she meets an honest, noble and pious young worker. They fall in love. He becomes crazy about their desperate love and, in order to flee with her, he robs and kills an old man. He is arrested, sentenced to death and dies without denouncing Veronique. Thus the democratic availability of the "dead letter" becomes a power of death.

This evil must be redeemed. So in the last part of the book, Veronique, now a rich widow, retires to a small village and tries to gain her salvation, guided by the country parson. But the means of her salvation are very strange. The parson does not uplift her soul with pious discourse and the Holy Scriptures. The reason for this is clear: the evil that caused the whole disaster was the intrusion of a book in the life of someone who should never have entered the world of writing. The evil made by the "mute letters" cannot be redeemed by any word, not even by the Word of God. Redemption must be written in another kind of writing, engraved in the flesh of real things. So the parson does not make Veronique a

nun, but a contractor, a businesswoman. He teaches her how to make her fortune and increase the prosperity of the village by collecting the forest's waters in sluices and irrigation trenches. Thus barren lands become rich meadows nourishing prized cattle. And just before dying, Veronique can show her repentance written on the land. She says, "I have engraved my repentance upon this land in indelible characters, as an everlasting record. It is written everywhere in the fields grown green (...) in the mountains' streams turned from their courses into the plain, once wild and barren, now fertile and productive."

This makes for a consistent conclusion. The cause of the evil was the very partition of the perceptible grounded on democratic literarity. The redemption of the evil is another partition of the perceptible: no more the old hierarchy of ranks, no more the old privilege of the acting word, uttered by the master, the priest, or the general, but the new power of a meaning written in the very fabric of "real things." That which can heal the evil done by the democratic "mute " letter is another kind of mute writing: a writing engraved on the body of things and withdrawn from the attempts of the greedy sons or daughters of plebeians.

The "mute pebbles" thus take on another meaning. The collapse of the representational paradigm means not only the collapse of a hierarchical system of address. It means the collapse of a whole regime of meaning. The rules and hierarchies of representation hung onto a definite link between saying and doing. If poetry was identified with fiction and fiction with the imitation of acting men, it was because the highest accomplishment of human action was supposed to be the action made by speaking itself. It is that power of the acting word that the popular orators of the Revolution had torn away from the hierarchical order of rhetorical culture and appropriated for unexpected aims. But that idea of the speech-act itself relied on a definite idea of what meaning means: meaning was a relation of address from one will to another. The hub of the system was the idea of speaking as using words to produce appropriate aims: specific moves in the souls and motions of bodies.

The new regime of literature dismissed that connection between meaning and willing. The parson could no longer use words to moralize to the plebeian's daughter. Nor could the reactionary critics use them to moralize to the writer Flaubert and teach him which subject matters and characters he should choose. But the plebeian's daughter, the worker-poets and the militant workers were equally subjected to the consequences of the new regime of meaning. In the 1790s their fathers had appropriated for themselves the words and sentences of Ancient rhetoric. But the age of rhetoric was over. Meaning was no more a relationship between one will and another. It turned out to be a relationship between signs and other signs.

Such was the reverse side of the democracy of literature. The mute letters offered to the greediness of plebeian children were taken away from them by another kind of muteness. The reactionary critics themselves discovered this double bind of literary muteness. This is the reason they did not teach Flaubert what he should have done. They explained to their readers that Flaubert could not have done otherwise, because he was a writer of "democratic times." They did not behave as defenders of rules or teachers of good taste. They behaved as interpreters of symptoms. In so doing, they endorsed the idea that the books they were faulting for the sin of muteness "spoke" in another way, that they spoke out of their very muteness. The "muteness" of literature is another way of speaking, another link between things and words. Flaubert 's or Hugo's sentences were made of "mute pebbles." Now, in the age of archeology, paleontology and philology, which was also the time of German Romanticism, everybody knew that pebbles, too, spoke in their own way. They had no voice. But they wore on their very bodies the testimony of their own history. And that testimony was much more faithful than any discourse. It was the unfalsified truth of things, opposed to the lies and chatter of orators. Such was the language of literature, its system of meaning. Meaning was no longer a relationship between one will and another. It turned out to be a relationship between signs and other signs. The words of literature had to display and decipher the signs and symptoms written in a "mute writing" on the body of things and in the fabric of language.

From that point of view, the muteness of literature took on another meaning, and that meaning involved a different "politics." This new idea of mute writing had been pioneered by Vico, when he set out to upset the foundations of Aristotelian poetics by disclosing the character of the "true Homer." The "true Homer" was not a poet in the representational sense, meaning an inventor of fictions, characters, metaphors and rhythms. His so-called fictions were no fictions to him, for he lived in a time when history and fiction were mingled. His characters, the valiant Achilles or the wise Nestor, were not characters as we have them, but personified abstractions, because the men of his time had neither the sense of individuality, nor the capacity for abstraction. His metaphors bore witness to an age where thought and image, ideas and things could not be separated. Even his rhythms and metres reflected a time when speaking and singing were interchangeable. In short, Homeric poetry, the essence of poetry, was a language of childhood. It was, Vico said, similar to the language of dumb persons. Another idea of the muteness of literature was linked to this new regime of meaning that bound together muteness and significance, poeticality and historicity. And it involved another idea of politics, contrasting the historicity enclosed in the letter to its democratic availability.

This might account for the way the very name of literature, in its new sense, replaced the old "*belles-lettres*." It is usually said to have occurred around 1800, and Germaine de Staël's book, *De la littérature*, published in 1800, is often taken as a turning point. But this turning point has two striking features. First, it does not point out any novelty in the practice of writing. What was changed was the visibility of writing. Germaine de Staël said that she would not change anything in the rules of *belles-lettres*. Her sole concern was to highlight the relationship between types of societies and types of literature. But this little addition was enough to set up a new system of visibility of writing. And that new system appeared as a response to a definite political issue. Madame de Staël wrote at the end of the French Revolution, and she was the champion of a third way, opposed both to revolution and to counter-revolution. She wanted to prove that the ideas of progress and perfectibility, uttered by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, had not caused the revolutionary bloodshed and terror, as charged. They had not, because the "ideas" stated by the writers did not act as wills. Further, they were the expression of movements in society and civilization that do not depend on anybody's will.

Literature did not act so much by expressing ideas and wills as it did by displaying the character of a time or a society. In this context, literature appeared at the same time as a new regime of writing, and another way of relating to politics, resting on this principle: writing is not imposing one will on another, in the fashion of the orator, the priest or the general. It is displaying and deciphering the symptoms of a state of things. It is revealing the signs of history, delving as the geologist does, into the seams and strata under the stage of the orators and politicians—the seams and strata that underlie its foundation. Forty years after *De la littérature,* Jules Michelet would set out to write the history of the French Revolution. He undoubtedly was a great Republican. But he was a Republican of "literary times." When he related the revolutionary festivals in the small villages, he enthusiastically referred to the testimonies written by local orators. But he did not quote those writings. He conveyed what was speaking *through* their speeches: the voice of the soil at harvest time, or the mud and the clamor of the industrial city's street. In the times of literature, mute things speak better than any orator.

This is not a matter of political engagement. It is a politics carried by literature itself. The Republican historian puts it into play, the reactionary novelist does so as well. This new regime and new "politics" of literature is at the core of the so-called realistic novel. Its principle was not reproducing facts as they are, as critics claimed. It was displaying the so-called world of prosaic activities as a huge poem—a huge fabric of signs and traces, of obscure signs that had to be displayed,

unfolded and deciphered. The best example and commentary of this can be found in Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*. At the beginning of the novel, the hero, Raphael, enters the showrooms of an antique shop. And there, Balzac writes, "this ocean of furnishings, inventions, fashions, works of art and relics made up for him an endless poem." The shop was indeed a mixture of worlds and ages: the soldier's tobacco-pouch alongside the priest's ciborium, the Moor's *yatogan* and the gold slipper of the seraglio. Stuffed boas grinned at stained-glass windows. A portrait of Madame Du Barry seemed to contemplate an Indian *chibbouk*. A pneumatic machine was poking out the eye of the emperor Augustus, and so on.

The mixture of the curiosity shop made all objects and images equal. Further, it made each object a poetic element, a sensitive form that is a fabric of signs as well. All these objects wore a history on their body. They were woven of signs that summarized an era and a form of civilization. And their random gathering made a huge poem, each verse of which carried the infinite virtuality of new stories, unfolding those signs in new contexts. It was the encyclopedia of all the times and all the worlds, the compost in which the fossils of them were blended together. Further on in the same book, Balzac contrasts Byron, the poet who has expressed with words some aspects of spiritual turmoil, to the true poet of the time, a poet of a new kind—Cuvier, the naturalist, who has done "true poetry": he has rebuilt cities out of some teeth, repopulated forests out of some petrified traces, and rediscovered races of giants in a mammoth's foot. The so-called realist novelist acts in the same way. He displays the fossils and hieroglyphs of history and civilization. He unfolds the poeticality, the historicity written on the body of ordinary things. In the old representational regime, the frame of intelligibility of human actions was patterned on the model of the causal rationality of voluntary actions, linked together and aimed at definite ends. Now, when meaning becomes a "mute" relation of signs to signs, human actions are no longer intelligible as successful or unsuccessful pursuits of aims by willing characters. And the characters are no longer intelligible through their ends. They are intelligible through the clothes they wear, the stones of their houses or the wallpaper of their rooms.

This results in a very interesting linkage between literature, science, and politics. Literature does a kind of side-politics or meta-politics. The principle of that "politics" is to leave the common stage of the conflict of wills in order to investigate in the underground of society and read the symptoms of history. It takes social situations and characters away from their everyday, earth-bound reality and displays what they truly are, a phantasmagoric fabric of poetic signs, which are historical symptoms as well. For their nature as poetic signs is the same as their nature as historical results and political symptoms. This "politics"

of literature emerges as the dismissal of the politics of orators and militants, who conceive of politics as a struggle of wills and interests.

We are moving toward a first answer to our question regarding the politics of literature "as literature." Literature as such displays a two-fold politics, a two-fold manner of reconfiguring sensitive data. On the one hand, it displays the power of literariness, the power of the "mute" letter that upsets not only the hierarchies of the representational system but also any principle of adequation between a way of being and a way of speaking. On the other hand, it sets in motion another politics of the mute letter: the side-politics or metapolitics that substitutes the deciphering of the mute meaning written on the body of things for the democratic chattering of the letter.

The duplicity of the "mute letter" has two consequences. The first consequence regards the so-called "political" or "scientific" explanation of literature. Sartre's flawed argument about Flaubert is not a personal and casual mistake. More deeply, it bears witness to the strange status of critical discourse about literature. For at least 150 years, daring critics have purported to disclose the political import of literature, to spell out its unconscious discourse, to make it confess what it was hiding and reveal how its fictions or patterns of writing unwittingly ciphered the laws of the social structure, the market of symbolic goods and the structure of the literary field. But all those attempts to tell the truth about literature in Marxian or Freudian key, in Benjaminian or Bourdieusian key, raise the same problem that we have already encountered. The patterns of their critical explanation of "what literature says" relied on the same system of meaning that underpinned the practice of literature itself. Not surprisingly, they very often came upon the same problem as Sartre. In the same way, they endorsed as new critical insights on literature the "social " and "political" interpretations of nineteenth-century conservatives. Further, the patterns they had to use to reveal the truth on literature are the patterns framed by literature itself. Explaining close-to-hand realities as phantasmagorias bearing witness to the hidden truth of a society, this pattern of intelligibility was the invention of literature itself. Telling the truth on the surface by traveling in the underground, spelling out the unconscious social text lying underneath—that also was a plot invented by literature itself.

Benjamin explained the structure of Baudelaire's imagery through the process of commodification and the topographical figures of passages and loitering. But the explanation makes sense on the ground of a definite model of intelligibility—the model of deciphering the unconscious hieroglyph, framed by nineteenth-century literature, re-elaborated by Proust, and borrowed from him by Benjamin. Benjamin refers to the Marxist analysis of the commodity as a fetish. But the

Balzacian paradigm of the shop as a poem had to exist first, to allow for the analysis of the commodity as a phantasmagoria, a thing that seems obvious at first glance but actually proves to be a fabric of hieroglyphs and a puzzle of theological quibbles. Marx 's commodity stems from the Balzacian shop. And the analysis of fetishism can account for Baudelaire's poetry, since Baudelaire's loitering takes place not so much in the passages of the Parisian boulevards as it does in the same Balzacian shop or workshop. The symptomatic reading that underpins the practices of historical or sociological interpretation was first of all a poetical revolution. And these sciences had to borrow from "naive" literature the patterns for highlighting its naiveté and telling the truth about its illusions.

Now, the second consequence concerns literature itself. The politics of literature turns out to be the conflict of two politics of the "mute letter": the politics of literariness and the politics of symptomatic reading. Balzac's *Country Parson* still is a good case in point. The evil done by democratic literariness has to be redeemed by the power of a writing engraved in the very flesh of things. But this fictional solution is a dead-end for literature itself. Were it taken at face value, it would mean that the writer must stop writing, must keep silent and cede the place to the engineers, who know the right way to bind men together, the right way to write without words in the flesh of things. This was not simply a fictional invention. It was the core of the utopia spelled out in the 1830s, a few years before Balzac wrote his novel, by the Saint-Simonian engineers and "priests": no more words, no more paper or literature. What is needed to bind people together is railways and canals.

Balzac did not stop writing, of course. But he spent five years completing the book. He rewrote it and rearranged the order of the chapters in order to have the hermeneutic plot match the narrative plot. But he failed to solve the contradiction. That contradiction did not oppose the realistic writer to the Christian moralist. It was the self-contradiction of the politics of literature. The novelist writes for people who should not read novels. The remedy to the evil that he evokes is another kind of writing. But that other kind of writing, pushed to the extreme, means the suppression of literature. The politics of literature carries a contradiction that can be solved only by self-suppression.

This contradiction is at play in the case of the apolitical writer as well as in the writer who wants to convey a political message and heal social problems. When Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary*, he was unwilling to denounce any moral or social trouble. He only wanted to "do" literature. But doing literature meant erasing the old differences between low and high subject matters; it meant dismissing any kind of specific language. The aim of the writer was to make art invisible. The mistake of Emma Bovary, by contrast, was her will to make art

visible, to put art in her life— ornaments in her house, a piano in her parlor, and poetry in her destiny. Flaubert would distinguish his art from that of his character by putting art only in his book, and making it invisible. In order to trace the border-line separating his art from that of his character, his prose had to go overboard on the muteness of common life. That new kind of mute writing would no longer be the silent language engraved in the flesh of material things. It would fit the radical muteness of things, which have neither will nor meaning. It would express, in its magnificence, the nonsense of life in general. The prose of the artist distinguished itself from the prose of everyday life insofar as it was still muter, still more deprived of "poetry."

That other kind of mute writing results in another kind of self-suppression. In Flaubert's last novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the two clerks fail in all their endeavors to manage their life according to the principles written in their books of medicine, agronomy, archeology, geology, philosophy, pedagogy, etc. In the end they decide to go back to their old job of copying. Instead of trying to apply the words of the books in real life, they will only copy them. This is good medicine for the disease of literariness and its political disorder. But this good medicine is the self-suppression of literature. The novelist himself has nothing more to do than to copy the books that his characters are supposed to copy. In the end he has to undo his plot and blur the boundary separating the prose of "art for art's sake" from the prose of the commonplace. When "art for art's sake" wants to undo its link to the prose of democracy, it has to undo itself.

Once more, its is not a matter of personal failure. Balzac's Christian and conservative commitment comes up against the same contradiction as Flaubert's nihilism. The same goes for the revolutionary attempts to create, out of the hermeneutic power of literature, a language that would make life clearer to itself, and change the self-interpretation of life into a new kind of poem, taking part in the framing of a new world and a new collective life. In the times of the Parisian revolutionary Commune, Rimbaud called for a new poetry that would, as he described it, no longer give its rhythm to action, but run before it, in advance. He called for poems filled with numbers and harmony, for a language open to the five senses, a language of the soul for the soul, containing everything—smells, sounds and colors. This idea of a "poetry of the future" was in line with the romantic idea of ancient Greek poetry as the music of a collective body. And it might sound strange that such an idea of poetry came to the fore in the times of free verse and prose poetry, when poetry was becoming less and less a matter of rhythm and metre, and more and more a matter of image. But this inconsistency is consistent with the politics of literature that put the Balzacian shop in the place of the tragic chorus. According to the logic of literature, the rhythm of the future

had to be invented out of the commodities and fossils of the curiosity shop. The Rimbaldian antique shop was the poor man 's shop. It was the shop of those scraps that Rimbaud lists at the beginning of his "Alchemy of the Word": stupid paintings, popular engravings, little erotic books, door panels, silly refrains.... Rimbaud wanted to connect two ideas of poetry: poetry as rhythm of a living body and poetry as archaeology of the mute signs sleeping on the body of ordinary things. But there was no path from the shop of the mute signs and the poeticality of outmoded refrains to the poetry of the future and the hymn of the collective body.

Literature had become a powerful machine of self-interpretation and self-poeticzation of life, converting any scrap of everyday life into a sign of history and any sign of history into a poetical element. This politics of literature enhanced the dream of a new body that would give voice to this reappropriation of the power of common poetry and historicity written on any door panel or any silly refrain. But this power of the mute letter could not result in "bringing back" this living body. The "living body" voicing the collective hymn had to remain the utopia of writing. In the times of futurist poetry and Soviet revolution, the Rimbaldian project would be attuned to the idea of a new life where art and life would be more or less identical. After those days, it would come back to the poetry of the curiosity shop, the poetry of the outmoded Parisian passages celebrated by Aragon in his *Paysan de Paris.* Benjamin in turn would try to rewrite the poem, to have the Messiah emerge from the kingdom of the Death of outmoded commodities. But the poem of the future experienced the same contradiction as the novel of bourgeois life, and the hymn of the people experienced the same contradiction as the work of pure literature. The life of literature is the life of this contradiction.

The "critical," "political' or "sociological" interpreters of literature who feel callenged by my analysis might reply that the contradiction of literature goes back to the old illusion of mistaking the interpretation of life for its transformation. My presentation has been an attempt to question the opposition in both ways. First, I have tried to substantiate the idea that so-called interpretations are political to the extent that they are reconfigurations of the visibility of a common world. Second, I would suggest that the discourse contrasting interpretive change and "real" change is itself part of the same hermeneutic plot as the interpretation that it challenges. The new regime of meaning underpinning both literature and social science has made the very sentence contrasting "changing the world" and "interpreting the world" into an enigma. The investigation of this "politics of literature" that is much more that a matter of writers may help us to understand this ambiguity and some of its consequences. The political dimension of literature

has been usually explained through social science and political interpretation. By turning matters upside-down, I have been unwilling to account for politics and social sciences through the mere transformations of poetical categories. My wish has been simply to propose a closer look at their intertwinings.

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