

LITERATURE, CRITICAL THEORY, AND POLITICS

# MUTE SPEECH

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

INTRODUCTION BY GABRIEL ROCKHILL

MUTE SPEECH

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# MUTE SPEECH

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

TRANSLATED BY JAMES SWENSON  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GABRIEL ROCKHILL

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# INTRODUCTION

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa<sup>1</sup>

GABRIEL ROCKHILL

.....

*La nouveauté historique signifiée par le terme de “littérature” est là: non pas dans un langage particulier mais dans une nouvelle manière de lier le dicible et le visible, les mots et les choses.\**

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

## A QUIET REVOLUTION

A singular event occurred on the Parisian intellectual landscape in the summer of 1966: a philosophical work ranging over 398 dense pages and engaging with a myriad of figures outside of the philosophical canon was sold at such a rate that it could barely be kept on the shelves. The first thirty-five hundred copies printed in April quickly disappeared. In June, another five thousand copies were printed that evaporated even more quickly than the first set. Three thousand additional copies had to be printed in July and another thirty-five hundred in September. By the end of the year, twenty thousand copies had been sold.<sup>2</sup> The theses in the book were as iconoclastic as they were far-reaching, providing a vast account of the discursive and epistemic configuration of the modern age marked by the dramatic moments of the “birth of man” with the emergence of the human sciences and the “death of man” announced by the counter-discourse of literature. This book, of course, was Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*).

In 1998, an equally singular event occurred. A book of the same scope and iconoclastic novelty was published that seemed to echo,

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\*This is where the historic novelty conveyed by the term ‘literature’ lies: not in a particular language but in a new way of linking the sayable and the visible, words and things.

in polemical counter-point, Foucault's endeavor in *Les mots et les choses*. Indeed, it appeared to take a peripheral and undeveloped element in Foucault's work—the account of literature as a counter-discourse in the modern *episteme*—and give it pride of place. At first glance, in fact, the book could very well be received as nothing short of *The Order of Things in Aesthetics*. However, it is much more than this. It offers one of the most acute critical reworkings of Foucault's historiographical methodology, as we will see, and it provides an account of the emergence of literature that extends well beyond the restricted field of the arts to include a discussion of the transformation of politics in the modern world, the appearance of the historical, political and social sciences, as well as the overall reconfiguration of meaning and discourse in the Western world that stretches back to the Renaissance. Far from being a footnote to Foucault, this book takes up the question of the history of literature in order to critically intervene in the contemporary configuration of knowledge with a radically new account of fundamental features of the “modern” world.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is tempting to introduce it by borrowing the soaring accolades found in Robert MacIver's foreword to Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*: “Here is a book that makes most books in its field seem obsolete or outworn. So rare an event is a portent of the times. Here, at a crucial hour, is a fresh comprehension of the form and the meaning of human affairs.”<sup>4</sup>

In comparison with the intellectual earthquake of the summer of 1966, this book, written by Jacques Rancière and ironically entitled *La parole muette* (*Mute* or *Silent Speech*), constituted but a minor tremor that appeared to leave the foundations of intellectual life in France unscathed. Sinking into the silence of its own obscure title, theoretical business seemed to carry on as usual—with a few important exceptions—in an intellectual environment significantly different from the groundswell in the 1960s that had catapulted Foucault's book to the forefront of the theoretical scene. And yet, the discreet appearance of *Mute Speech* ironically manifests one of the fundamental theses of the book: history is not composed of dramatic breaks, and the rhetoric of discursive blocks and cataclysmic events should be jettisoned in favor of a more refined mapping of the diverse strata and tensions of history.<sup>5</sup> In short, the quiet, relatively silent appearance of *Mute Speech*, at least when compared to the dramatic debut of *The Order of Things*, serendipitously mirrors the rival historiographical theses in these two books: Foucault's stalwart early insistence on a discontinuous history of the discursive configuration of the human sciences versus Rancière's rejection of the drama of discontinuity in favor of studying the silent revolutions of the past in terms of what I would call metastatic transformations.

The moderately inconspicuous reception of Rancière's *magnum opus* in aesthetics—as well as the belatedness of its translation into English—is

undoubtedly due to a myriad of competing factors, including the historical conjuncture of the French intellectual scene and its Anglophone reception. It is surely related as well to the contrast between the crisp poetic clarity of Foucault's style and Rancière's arduous working and reworking of language as a living body of symbols that reveals as much as it hides, manifesting in each expression the nature and history of language *qua* force of community (*puissance de communauté*). However, there is also at least one important theoretical reason: Rancière breaks in radical ways with the powerful historical narratives that have largely become orthodoxy in the various theories of aesthetics that have dominated the twentieth century and the work of many of his predecessors. The overarching framework of these narratives is the opposition between classicism and modernism according to which a classical age of codified representation is interrupted by an intransitive, antirepresentational shift in the modern era. The paradigm of artistic modernity is often based on the assumption that the classical age was one in which a strict set of rules dictated to the artist the nature of the work to be produced. In short, art was ultimately rule following and therefore had a fundamentally conservative tendency to defend the powers in place. What is referred to as modernity—if it is understood as the emergence of modern art and literature in the nineteenth century, the historical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century, or a unique power of innovation that regularly reappears throughout the history of the arts—supposedly breaks with the procrustean nature of classical art in order to liberate expression, language, and forms in such a way that it brings with it a unique potential for political emancipation.<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, a multitude of rival and even incompatible versions of modernism, which make various uses of rampant oppositions such as the following: transitivity and intransitivity, communication and incomunicability, realism and abstraction, the representational and the antirepresentational, the diegetic and the self-referential, etc. It is by no means my intention to unduly identify all of the different versions. Let it suffice for my purposes here to index this framework of modernity and its various avatars because it is precisely its persistent domination, with all of its obligatory assumptions, that has contributed to *Mute Speech*'s relative obscurity and to the feeling of unease, if not outright resistance, that overtakes the reader. Rather than discovering the comforting mirror of the modernist doxa opposing a classical era of regulated artistic production to a modern age of aesthetic liberation, which always reflects back to us precisely what we already know, Rancière takes us *through the looking glass*. If we're willing to follow him, he opens up radically new vistas in the history of the arts and literature, and he provides unforeseen

tools for developing a novel critical theory of aesthetics. It is my ambition in this introduction to foreground—in the name of developing just such a critical theory—the unique subversion of the modernist doxa inherent in Rancière’s project. My argument aims, indeed, at furthering the break with the modernist framework that he has undertaken by giving pride of place to what I take to be the most provocative and promising aspects of his work.

Jorge Luis Borges once attributed an oddly prophetic claim to a Chinese prose writer: “the unicorn, for the very reason that it is so anomalous, will pass unnoticed. Our eyes see what they are accustomed to see.”<sup>7</sup> Heeding Borges’s warning, it is worth highlighting at the outset, particularly for those readers who would doubt the novelty of Rancière’s undertaking in order to comfortably view his work within the modernist paradigm, that he has on numerous occasions expressed his desire to break with the doxa of modernism:

The aesthetic regime of the arts, it can be said, is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label “modernity.” However, “modernity” is more than an incoherent label. It is, in its different versions, the concept that diligently works at masking the specificity of this regime of the arts and the very meaning of the specificity of regimes of art. It traces, in order either to exalt or deplore it, a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative.<sup>8</sup>

In the interview, “*Le tombeau de la fin de l’histoire*,” he distances his work from the quarrel between *les Anciens et les Modernes*, and he describes his attack on the notion of modernity by foregrounding a number of its insufficiencies:

First, it [the notion of modernity] improperly identifies the transformations of art with exemplary breaks: for example, pictorial abstraction or the ready-made, which are particular forms of a much more general anti-representational paradigm. Then it assimilates the break, constructed in this manner, to the accomplishment of a political task or of the historical destiny of an era. This seems to me to fall within a general *onto-theology* that sets up a grand master-signifier capable of ruling over an era. This concept has ended up diluting art in a pathetic melodrama that blends the Kantian sublime and the murder of the Father, the ban on representation and the techniques of mechanical reproduction, the flight of the gods, and the extermination of European Jews. Instead of metaphysical determinations of the age, I wanted to get out of this pathos in order to identify specific regimes of art.<sup>9</sup>

He explicitly states, regarding the dismantling of the poetics of representation described in *Mute Speech*: “I contrasted this breakdown [*éclatement*] of the logic of representation with the simple versions that define modernism, which merely oppose the constraints of representation to the autonomy of the work.”<sup>10</sup> Since the language that he uses can occasionally be misleading, particularly in the case of the representative system of the arts that I will discuss below, it is worth citing a final instance in which he insists on his concerted effort to part ways with the simplistic views of history promulgated by the modernist doxa:

I have tried—and, of course, I am not the only one—to break up the somewhat simplistic vision we have of the transition from the representative to the non-representative in the form of the transition from figurative painting to so-called abstract painting. For me, the representative system of art is not simply a matter of figurative or non-figurative depiction [*defiguration ou de non-figureation*], of resemblance or non-resemblance. It is an ordered set of relations between the sayable and the visible.<sup>11</sup>

The rejection of the modernist doxa, it should be noted, is not a meager propaedeutic preparing the path to the approbation of postmodernism. On the contrary, Rancière finds the latter category to be as deceptive and misleading as the concept of modernism. It mistakenly suggests that the breakdown of the divisions between the arts, the dissolution of the “distinctive features” of artistic media (as well as of art itself) and the collapse of the overall teleology of modernity is something new. Postmodernism is thereby simply registering elements in the arts that were masked by the modernist doxa and actually date back to at least the early nineteenth century:

The teleological model of modernity became untenable at the same time as its divisions between the “distinctive features” of the different arts, or the separation of a pure domain of art. Postmodernism, in a sense, was simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a “distinctive feature of art” by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture.<sup>12</sup>

If there is no postmodern break, it’s not simply because there was never a modern break (nor any other clean break in history, for that matter). It’s also because postmodernism, at this level, is nothing short of an obfuscating label for the belated realization—by some—that modernism had failed to provide an

adequate account of artistic history. Therefore, Rancière harbors no hope whatsoever that postmodernism will do any better.<sup>13</sup>

## RADICAL HISTORICISM?

The position Rancière maintains from the opening pages of *Mute Speech* approximates—but only approximates—what I would call *radical historicism*.<sup>14</sup> What I mean by this, first and foremost, is that he recognizes and clearly affirms that his object of study and categories of analysis are historically contingent. There is no such thing, for Rancière, as art or literature in general; there is no transhistorical kernel whose various metamorphoses constitute history.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, these objects are themselves historically produced.<sup>16</sup> This does not, however, mean that he purports to simply present an empirical account of the true historical nature of artistic and literary practices. In a unique move that has far-reaching consequences, he insists on the necessity of examining practices in conjunction with the theoretical discourses that establish the conditions by which these are perceived *qua* artistic and literary practices. He thereby rejects the widespread assumption that art history or literary history can be separated from the history of aesthetic theory.<sup>17</sup> If we do not take into account the speculative framework defining the status of art or literature within a particular historical conjuncture, we run the risk of either accepting the idealism of those who blindly believe in an eternal idea of art or sinking into the simplistic empiricism of those who think they can analyze practices in and of themselves (as if practices did not take place within a discursive framework of legibility). In Rancière's singular account, theory and practice go hand in hand: Hugo, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust share the historical stage with Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel.

In the introduction to *Mute Speech*, Rancière astutely recalls, for instance, that Jean Racine's *Britannicus* was not strictly speaking a piece of literature in the seventeenth century. It was understood to be a tragedy belonging, therefore, to the category of poetry. The term *littérature* did not refer to an art in the seventeenth century but to a type of knowledge, semi-erudite and semi-amateur, allowing one to speak intelligently about the works of the belles-lettres tradition. The idea that *littérature* refers to a distinct experience of language and an identifiable body of work that manifests this experience begins to emerge in the eighteenth century and becomes prominent in the nineteenth century. The shift between the understanding of literature in the era of the belles lettres and the age of literature as we understand it today is indicative of an overall sea

change in the arts that was slow enough not to be generally remarked upon. Rancière refers to this shift as a silent revolution.

It is important to insist on the fact that the emergence of a new theoretico-practical framework of literature and the arts does not constitute an absolute break with the past. Rancière dismisses Foucault's discontinuist conception of history and the logic of epochs and events that structures much of his early writings. This is one of the reasons why he generally avoids the vocabulary of *classical art*, *classicism*, *the modern age*, and *modernity*, unless he simply uses these terms as conceptual shorthand to index temporal categories that are as useful as they are limiting. This does not mean, however, that Rancière supports the naive return to the continuist versions of history deprecated by Foucault. Rather than thinking history in terms of a series of cataclysmic breaks or a continuous trajectory, he maps out the competing relationships between artistic regimes<sup>18</sup>: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of arts, and the aesthetic regime of art.<sup>19</sup> It is true that the latter appears to be the only new regime since the Greeks, and this raises a series of questions and complications concerning the various historical factors that have fostered its emergence.<sup>20</sup> However, the ethical regime and the representative regime continue to be operative in the modern era.

Before turning to the major differences between the representative regime and the aesthetic regime—or the poetics of representation and the poetics of expressivity, to use the vocabulary of *Mute Speech*—I would like to insist on the important role played by what we can call *historical cross-fertilization*. If I propose to use, up to a certain point, the vocabulary of *radical historicism* to qualify Rancière's position on the arts, it is in part because he does not aim at reducing artistic production to a fixed set of determinants that are specific to a clearly delimited historical period. In other words, he rejects *reductive historicism*. Indeed, he has described his project in terms of “an archeology [that is] more open to the event than Foucault's archeology, but without the messianism found in Benjamin.”<sup>21</sup> Instead of a set of determinants interrupted by discontinuous breaks or messianic moments, he insists on what he has elsewhere referred to as the complex intertwining of the horizontal and the diagonal dimensions of history:

In fact, all of my work has continuously made use of these two dimensions of analysis: on the one hand, a horizontal contextualization that inscribes, for instance, Wordsworth's poetry in the context of the revolutionary *Fête de la Fédération*, on the other hand a diagonal that inscribes his preoccupation with a writing close to the senses [*une écriture rapprochée des sens*] in a discursive context where it meets at once the Platonic critique of writing, the

quixotic “madness” of physically verifying the truth of books and the Rimbaudian dream of a language accessible to all the senses [*langage accessible à tous lessens*]. [...] Opening this dimension that cuts across so-called historical contexts is essential to grasping the war of writing [*la guerre des écritures*] and its stakes in terms of the distribution of the sensible, the symbolic configuration of commonality [*configuration symbolique du commun*].<sup>22</sup>

In brief, the recognition of inscription in time and the attempt to come to terms with it do not necessarily lead to reductive historicism, as Rancière has shown at great length in his early work, and in particular *The Nights of Labor*. In the case of *Mute Speech*, the “horizontal contextualization,” which takes the form a detailed historical analysis of the transformation of the arts since approximately the Renaissance, is regularly interrupted by diverse historical “diagonals” that cut across various contexts, acting as forms of historical cross-fertilization.

One of the preeminent examples of this is the central role played by a counter-historical figure like Plato. In spite of the fact that he lived and wrote in the late-fifth and early-fourth century B.C., his reflections constitute a significant reference point that comes to the foreground at regular intervals through the course of *Mute Speech*. In particular, the Platonic critique of writing as the democratic letter that nomadically wanders without a proper place, thereby destabilizing the hierarchical order of beings, sets the stage for subsequent confrontations between the anarchic power of literarity and the hierarchical distribution of bodies.<sup>23</sup> It is in this way that certain principles in Plato cut across time, disturbing the contextual distribution of events.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, they appear to cut across artistic regimes insofar as Plato is identified in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000 for the original French text) as one of the key figures in the ethical regime of images. In this regime, which is not theorized as such in *Mute Speech* (1998), art in the singular does not exist, but only images that are distributed according to the fundamental dividing line between pernicious simulacra and the genuine images modeled on the truth, whose purpose is to educate the citizenry regarding the correct distribution of bodies in the community. The critique of writing and the democratic letter, within the logic of this regime, is a critique of simulacra, i.e., of ungrounded and misleading images distracting the population from the “true” order of things. In short, writing is considered an orphan letter that speaks on its own, having forgotten its origin and remaining indifferent to its reader. It is unclear exactly what this means when it is translated into the representative or aesthetic regimes, for Rancière has not sufficiently addressed the problem of translatability between artistic regimes (at least in the case of the

ethical regime).<sup>25</sup> However, it appears that the problematic of writing itself cuts across artistic regimes in much the same way that certain Platonic principles traverse various historical contexts.<sup>26</sup> This type of cross-fertilization can be extremely rich and productive, particularly by calling into question determinist forms of contextualism,<sup>27</sup> as well as the attempt to reduce historical developments to patterns of direct influence. Indeed, Rancière's passing comments on Flaubert's relationship to Spinoza are particularly interesting in this regard, as he suggests that in spite of the caricature of pantheism he inherited from the Romantic era, Flaubert nonetheless grasps what is essential to a certain kind of Spinozism in establishing a "realism" founded on the harmony between the ideal and the real. This being said, there is nonetheless a risk in elevating certain positions beyond their temporal inscription: the risk of making them into more or less transhistorical—if not metaphysical or ontotheological—principles rather than axioms that actually intervene by being mobilized in various sociohistorical conjunctures (as was clearly the case with the Romantic appropriation of Plato<sup>28</sup>). A "principled" history can easily glide off of the tracks of "effective" history by its attraction to the ethereal realm of perennial ideas.<sup>29</sup>

Rancière is not simply interested in describing the complex logic of the past. He clearly wants to intervene in his own historical conjuncture in order to reconfigure the current image of the past and have it come to bear on the present. Once again, the reader could refer to his earlier work in *The Nights of Labor* or his analysis of Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to confirm the extent to which historical description and polemical intervention in the present are often—if not always—twin projects for Rancière. To be sure, he has described his methodology in the following terms:

My manner of treating the past is, on the contrary, to do away with this entanglement of judgment and distance. On the one hand, it is a matter of conveying a past in its proper presence, of making [us] feel the language, the rhetoric, the style and the sonority of an epoch. [...] On the other hand, it is a question of projecting the past into our present with the singularity of a foreign body.<sup>30</sup>

The return to the past and to the "things themselves" is always a very subtle attempt to enter into the singular specificity of discourses and practices, and Rancière is a veritable master of immanent analysis who works through the details of cultural particulars rather than simply projecting onto them a preestablished philosophic system. At the same time, he would surely lend his support to Immanuel Kant's noteworthy statement: "I shall not make my head into a

parchment and scribble old, half-effaced information from archives on it.”<sup>31</sup> He rejects mindless, positivist archival work in the name of a thoughtful engagement with the past in order to reconfigure our understanding of it and displace the current field of possibilities:

What distinguishes my position, then, is, on the one hand, putting our objects and forms of thought in historical perspective instead of [relying on] verdicts founded on *a priori* assumptions, but also challenging the schemata of historical necessity, making the archeology of our present into a topography of possibilities that preserves their nature as possibilities [*une topographie des possibles qui conserve leur caractère possibles*].<sup>32</sup>

In returning to the theme of radical historicism, I would argue that the interventionism prevalent in Rancière’s work is a fundamental aspect of any radical history. Since history is never complete in the sense of having reached its “end,” but always history in the making, an essential dimension of all history is precisely to *make* history, i.e., to intervene in the past and present to make sense of what has happened, what is happening and what can happen.<sup>33</sup>

## RIVAL POETICS

The schism between the poetics of representation and the poetics of expression is at the core of *Mute Speech*. The poetic tradition of the belles lettres, which dominated the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries (but has its origins in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and continues to exist today), is based less on a system of formal rules than on an idea of the relationship between speech and action. Four major principles structure it, according to Rancière. To begin with, there is the principle of fiction, which asserts that the essence of the poem is the representation of actions not the use of metric regularity. This means that the poem is not defined by a particular mode of language—as is often the case within the modernist doxa—but is fundamentally understood to be an arrangement of actions. The unifying attribute of the arts is to be found in their mimetic identity, that is to say in their respective construction of stories through the representation of actions. It is in this way that Rancière breaks with the widespread understanding of mimesis as a “normative principle stating that art must make copies resembling their models.”<sup>34</sup> “It is the substance of the poem,” he asserts, “the fabrication of a plot arranging actions that represent the activities of men,

which is the foremost issue, to the detriment of the essence of the image, a copy examined with regard to its model.”<sup>35</sup> The arts, which are therefore based primarily on imitation understood as the representation of actions rather than on a supposed preoccupation with “mimetic” resemblance, are further unified by the model of organic coherence, which takes works—regardless of the matter or form of imitation—to be organically unified wholes aimed at a common purpose. The adage summarizing the principle of translatability of the poetics of representation, *ut pictura poesis* or “as is painting so is poetry,” literally means that painting and poetry can be related and even converted into one another through what they share in common: the arrangement of actions into an organic whole. This is one of the reasons for the primacy of the organization of acts over the fidelity to linguistic form in the translations and critical commentaries published within the framework of this poetics.<sup>36</sup>

The principle of fiction also presupposes a specific space and time of fiction. This is why Don Quixote, Cervantes’s novelistic hero who refuses to recognize the distinct specificity of the world of fiction, produces an early fissure in the edifice of the representative system. It is important to note, against the modernist doxa, that the principle of fiction is not simply the primacy of content over form. The very relationship between content and form changes based on the poetics in question. In the case of the system of representation, the *inventio*—the choice of subject matter, classically defined as the representation of actions—governs both the *dispositio* (the organization of parts) and the *elocutio* (the ornamentation of discourse). As we will see with the other principles, it is the intellectual element of the invented fiction that reigns over the disposition of its parts (generic principle) and the appropriate material expressions (principle of decorum). It is this hierarchical order, much more so than the traditional topoi of imitative resemblance, canonical rule following, the “three unities” or catharsis, that defines one of the central features of the poetics of representation.

The second principle is the generic principle or the principle of genericity (*principe de généricité*), i.e., the necessary inscription of the fictional arrangement of actions in a specific genre. Unlike the definition of genres in the modernist vulgate, Rancière insists on the fact that a genre is not defined by a set of formal rules but by the nature of the object of fiction. Demonstrating the centrality of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the representative system, he explains that there are fundamentally two types of people or actions that can be imitated: the lofty, the noble, the superior, and the lowly, the common, the inferior. Epic and tragic poets choose the former, whereas comic and satirical poets concentrate on the latter. The system of genres is thus grounded in a hierarchy of represented subjects, and each genre defines particular modes of representation. The generic

principle is, therefore, closely linked to the principle of decorum or appropriateness (*principe de convenance*), according to which the actions and discourses attributed to characters must be appropriate to their nature and to the particular genre in question. This is not a matter of local color or fictional verisimilitude, but of conformity to the nature of human beings in general as well as to the specific character of a particular group or individual (Racine is not Mark Twain or William Faulkner, appropriate depictions are not necessarily realistic in the sense of more or less directly imitating reality). Moreover, the actions and discourses must be appropriate to the moral sense of decency of the day, while obeying the logic of actions and characters fitting for a particular genre. The perfect manifestation of this poetic system does not amount to the precise following of a set of rules. On the contrary, it is a result of the ingenious ability to successfully weave together natural, historical, moral and conventional forms of appropriateness. There is no absolute rule that can be learned for how this is to be done because the principle of decorum is ultimately only something that can be felt or experienced as pleasurable. It is the spectator, or at least a certain kind of spectator, who can judge if a particular work is successfully “appropriate.” Therefore, as we will see, a relationship of equality exists between the author, the character represented, and the spectator.

The privileged spectators within the representative framework are men and women of action, and more specifically those who act through speech: generals, orators, princes and princesses, lawyers, etc. The public is made up of people who have come to instruct themselves on the efficacious use of speech to govern, to educate, to incite, to gratify, to convince, or to condemn. The fourth and final principle of the representative order is, therefore, the principle of efficacious discourse, the principle of presence or contemporaneity (*principe d'actualité*), which dictates the primacy of speech as act and performance in the present. The fictional arrangement of actions is fundamentally a staging of the act of speaking and of the efficacious power of speech that serves a pedagogical role by teaching the rhetorical power of the voice. Although this final principle does not contradict the first principle of fiction, it nonetheless binds the “autonomous” realm of the pleasurable and appropriate imitation of actions to the “real” world of discourses that persuade and teach, save souls, punish recalcitrants, harangue soldiers, and council kings. The ideal of efficacious speech is an art that is more than an art, because it is an art of living in society, a way of life, a rhetoric of contemporary existence.

In summary, the problem in the poetics of representation is not one of obeying procrustean rules that would later be broken by iconoclastic modernists. In fact, it is arguable that it is precisely the retroactive reading of history proposed

by the modernists that presents classicism as an art resulting from the strict obedience to a set of rules. The vision of art history in the modernist doxa resembles a mirror that has been held up to history by those who narcissistically enjoy seeing in the past the sole story of themselves and the progressive necessity of their own preoccupations. Rancière ardently dismantles this retroactive modernist account of literary and artistic history that plagues the theoretical debates of the twentieth century. In the poetics of representation, fables, understood as arrangements of action in a fictional space-time, belong to genres, which are defined by the subject represented and are organized around the appropriate nature of action and discourse within the real field of efficacious speech. Rancière also jettisons the simplistic opposition between the supposed conservative nature of classical art and the progressive aspects of modern art by insisting on the fact that the productions of the representative system can just as easily merge with the hierarchical structures of monarchy as with the egalitarian order of the orators of emerging republics. The hierarchy of the *inventio* (principle of fiction) over the *dispositio* (generic principle) and the *elocutio* (principle of decorum) is mitigated by the equality of the author, the character and the spectator in the real realm of speech as act (principle of presence). The subordination of poetry to performative speech, far from simply mirroring the hierarchies of absolutism, comes to the fore at the time of the revolutionary assemblies.

In order to understand the distribution of the sensible proper to the poetics of expressivity, which comes to full fruition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, let us begin with the fact that the representative system is founded on the subordination of the material side of the arts (the *elocutio*) to the intellectual side (the *inventio*). Rancière takes Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) as one of his key examples of the collapse of the poem as it was understood within the representative order. Hugo's prose poem petrifies human speech and gives voice to the towering stones at the heart of his novel: the cathedral of Notre Dame. The hierarchical relationship between the intellectual and the material, between the soul and the body, is undercut as the material power of written words and stones that come to speak overthrows the cosmology of the earlier poetics. The four principles of the system of representation are thereby reversed. The principle of fiction gives way to the primacy of language (which is not to be confused with speech in the strict sense of the term). The silent realm excluded from the fable comes to take on a language of its own as the mute stones of Notre Dame give voice to the history of French civilization. The *elocutio*, in other words, frees itself from the *inventio*, or the choice of subject matter, which had formerly governed it. It thereby opens itself to the power of expression in the new objects of art, to the locutionary force of silent things. Second,

the distribution of genres is dismantled by the principle of the equality of all represented subjects. The novel rises to power as the false genre, the genreless genre that freely circulates through diverse publics rather than being restricted to specific domains or privileged locations. Third, the principle of decorum is overturned by the indifference of style in relation to the subject represented. With the abolition of genres, style becomes, in Flaubert's language, an absolute manner of seeing things in which there are no longer beautiful or base subjects.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the model of writing displaces the ideal of performative speech. The privileged space of the theater, the consecrated domain of speech as act and efficacious rhetoric, gives way to the novel as the democratic letter that wanders without a privileged place, a disturbing nomad in the fields of meaning.

*Mute Speech* thereby foregrounds the unique configuration within the “new poetics” in which silent things take on a language of their own, meaningless objects become a system of signs. It is along these lines that the expressive regime transforms the principle of translatability of the arts. Instead of thinking the correspondence between the arts in terms of equivalent ways of treating stories within organically unified works, the poetics of expressivity is based on an analogy between forms of language, such as the poem of stones in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* and the monument of his own book. The unifying principle is henceforth the Word (*Verbe*), the originary language of all languages, i.e., the power of incarnation inherent in each specific language. This immanent power of expression in all things can be interpreted in two ways. It can be taken in a mystical light—as with many of the German Romantics—such that the world becomes an endless cipher and the poeticity of things is ubiquitous. It can also be rationalized as mute things come to bear witness to identifiable truths, such as those purportedly discovered by the new science of history, which called on the testimony of the silent witnesses of the commonplace that had been ignored in the past. As we will see, therefore, the expressive regime is not simply a new system of the arts. It introduced a novel configuration of meaning that actually fostered the emergence of the human and social sciences according to Rancière.

The causal poetics of fables organizes actions in genres and provides them with their appropriate modes of expression in order to promulgate effectual rhetoric through pleasurable stories. The expressive poetics of language, ushered in with what Rancière elsewhere calls the aesthetic regime of art, changes the nature of artistic phenomena, in part by introducing the very notion of art in the singular. In the representative system, the poem was defined as a distinct *manière de faire* (way of doing and making): the imitation of actions according to the four principles discussed above. In the aesthetic regime, however, artistic phenomena:

are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into nonknowledge, *logos* identical with *pathos*, the intention of the unintentional, etc.<sup>38</sup>

This difference is essential: the poem is no longer a specific type of production, but rather art, or more precisely aesthetics, is a quality of sensory objects found in a regime in which the sensible has become foreign to itself. Such an identification of aesthetics extricates art from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter or genres. However, at the same time, the destruction of the representative border separating the imitation of actions from other ways of doing and making (*manières de faire*) runs the risk of dissolving art into life itself: “The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.”<sup>39</sup> We touch here on the contradiction of the art of the commonplace (*l’art du quelconque*): if the identification of art in the singular is simultaneously the destruction of the very distinction between art and the commonplace, art in the aesthetic regime is in the grips of a fundamental contradiction, whose various iterations we will need to explore.

## THE WORK OF CONTRADICTIONS

It might appear that Rancière is simply putting a new terminological facade on the worn-out opposition between representational art in the classical tradition and the anti-representational work of modernity. Indeed, he runs the risk—with his vocabulary and his more or less systematic opposition between two rival poetries—of sinking into the representational narrative he wants to disregard. However, he is explicit in affirming that this is not his intention: “In distinguishing the aesthetic regime and the representative regime, I wanted to oppose the traditional view that separates a representative age and a non-representative age based on the model of the transition from figurative depiction [*la figuration*] to abstraction in painting.”<sup>40</sup> It is essential to highlight in this regard that the regimes of art do not function as structural sets of conditions that monolithically determine cultural products. On the contrary, they act as more or less incompatible fields of artistic and theoretical practice. Rancière thereby avoids

the forms of structural, moncausal determination that plagued many of his predecessors as well as the accompanying hermeneutic schemata that seek to reduce an entire set of works to a single framework. Each regime is made up of more or less autonomous axioms, which can and do come into conflict with one another, as we will see. Moreover, the separation between the poetics of representation and the poetics of expression is not as clear and concise as a simple line in the sand. Quite to the contrary, Rancière emphasizes the complex overlapping and intertwining of these two poetics.

For our purposes here, let it suffice to underscore two examples. First of all, Rancière is interested in transitional forms of transformation. For instance, he foregrounds the importance of Daniel Huet's 1669 treatise, *De l'origine des romans*, insofar as it discreetly replaces the concept of *mimesis* by the larger notion of *fabulation*, thereby subverting the principle of *mimesis*. As the sensory presentation of truth, *fabulation* is a language of the image in which the categories of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* founder. Secondly, Rancière emphasizes important early signs of the expressive poetics, thereby resisting any simplistic historical periodization. Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1725) breaks the compromise that still exists in Huet's work between the old dramatic conception of poetry and the new tropological conception. He thereby embraces and promotes the novel understanding of poetry as a specific state of language (rather than the product of an artist): a symbolic language that expresses itself more through what it does not say than through what it explicitly states, more through its involuntary manifestation of the originary power of language than through its will to express something specific. The true Homer, for Vico, was the voice of ancient Greece, the witness to a particular stage of language, the expression of the multitude that belongs to no one in particular. We might also recall another important prodrome of the expressive regime touched upon above: Cervantes' dismantling of the principle of fiction in *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615). For that matter, as we've already seen, Rancière interprets Plato's critique of writing as a very early sign of the realization of the risks of democratic literarity and the genreless genre of the novel, both of which would become central features of the poetics of expressivity. For these reasons, among others, it is clear that he is not simply opposing two ages or eras of artistic production.

There is further evidence for Rancière's break with reductive determinism, periodic history and the simplistic schematizations of the modernist doxa. Rather than there being determined systems that indiscriminately impose themselves on the totality of artistic production within a given timeframe, there are competing and overlapping regimes that are racked by internal and external contradictions.<sup>41</sup> Literature, to take the most poignant example, is

structured by a fundamental contradiction between two principles in the expressive regime. On the one hand, there is the primacy of language, which undermines the principle of fiction by identifying the essence of the poem with the essence of language itself. On the other hand, there is the principle of indifference that subverts the logic of genres by breaking the bond between the subject matter and a specific mode of expression. The problematic compatibility between these two principles gives birth to a myriad of different possible solutions. The core of the problem is how to relate an expressive principle of necessity, according to which each specific language gives voice to the original power of the Word, to an antirepresentative principle of indifference that ignores any necessity of language.<sup>42</sup> This contradiction between necessity and indifference, between expressive force and idle chatter, is related to another contradiction between two types of writing: writing as the word that attests to the power of incarnation and writing as an empty letter without a privileged body, freely circulating for use by anyone. The writing of “everything speaks,” in which voices radiate from silent things in the grand poetry of the world, is accompanied by its opposite: the nomadic writing that destroys the privileged bodies of speech, the incarnation of the Word, and the poetry of the world. In short, there is a conflict between two mute forms of expressivity. On the one hand, there is the speech grandiloquently bestowed on all of the mute things of the world, as well as the silent speech of words that are no longer instruments of persuasion but rather symbols of the power of the Word incarnated in the Book of Life. On the other hand, there is the mute-loquacious letter of writing that defies symbolization but that also speaks too much in its nomadic wanderings that undermine the symbolic order of embodied meaning. The grand writing of things, in which the specific difference of a poetics of spirit is inscribed in the objective life of language comes into conflict with the indifference of form inherent in the democratic literarity of disembodied letters. In summary, the hieroglyph, whose idea is inscribed in its body, contends with the orphan letter that has no proper body. It should come as no surprise, then, that literature has been sacralized by some, and declared empty by others. It is ultimately the name for a contradictory poetics.

Literature, in its modern sense, has very little to do with a form of writing that is autotelic, intransitive or self-referential. It is, at its core, torn between spirit (*esprit*) and letter. For the breakdown of the subordination of the *elocutio* to the *inventio* does not simply open the floodgates to formal experimentation. Instead, the *elocutio* finds itself split between the profound expression of that which gives birth to speech (spirit) and the equality of all subject matter in the face of the sheer, indifferent power of the letter. Literature is thereby caught

between two extremes: the generalized poetics of life that engulfs poetry in spirit and the prose of the world that dissolves spirit—including the spirit of literature—into the immanent plane of exchangeable letters. The contradiction between spirit and letter does not, however, render literature impossible. In Rancière's vocabulary, this is a productive contradiction that fosters numerous impressive attempts to deal with two apparently incompatible principles. Literature, it might be said, is this contradiction at work in the assorted endeavors to come to terms with the relationship between the grand, obligatory writing of the spirit and the egalitarian, indifferent words of hollow letters.

Instead of interpreting the works of the expressive regime as simple products of this underlying contradiction, Rancière makes a concerted effort to examine in detail the specific projects of the authors he analyzes in order to show how they propose singular solutions to shared conundrums. Once again, we see that he resists the impulses of reductive determinism, historical moncausality and monolithic structuralism in favor of a much more nuanced account. He insists on the necessity of immanent readings that engage directly with the works themselves in order to avoid the blind projection of a pre-established philosophical system onto a set of cultural particulars. This distinguishes his work from a great many of his fellow philosophers, who are too often content with a form of *illustrative hermeneutics* in which works of art serve as simple pretexts for illustrating axiomatic principles that were established long before the encounter with the works themselves. "I always need to take up, once again, the texts and films I am talking about," Rancière writes, "at the risk of discovering that I have to start all over again from scratch."<sup>43</sup> In the case of *Mute Speech*, authors are not presented as so many marionettes manipulated by the strings of a rigorous determination. Instead, they participate in an ongoing struggle to sort through the conflictual forces of their conjuncture, negotiating between the contradictory principles of expressivity, as well as between the incompatible axioms of the old and the new poetics.

Hugo, as we have seen, reverses the relationship between matter and spirit: the mute stones of a cathedral come to speak the soul of a society just as the sonorous and image-producing power of material words overthrows their domination by the intellectual side of poetry, refusing to simply be the expressions of thought and the causal order of action. Émile Zola perpetuates the new symbolicity of the silent world at the core of Romantic poetry by giving voice, like Hugo, to silent things, be it Nana's boudoir or the displays at *les Halles*. The interminable descriptions of realism or naturalism are by no means, for Rancière, an attempt to reduce language to its communicational role or bring literature closer to journalism by producing a "reality" effect. They are founded

on the poetic doubling of all things in the world of symbols, a duplicity that can be interpreted in a mystical sense or in a positivist sense (if not a combination between the two). It is this new cosmology that is at the heart of what is commonly called realism and naturalism, and this is what makes them the agents of the new poetics.

Rancière's thesis, at this level, is threefold. To begin with, he breaks with the longstanding tendency to situate realism and naturalism in the pre-modern world of classical representation and instead places them firmly at the center of the silent revolution of the expressive regime. In fact, he even calls into question the simplistic labels that are used to identify them, and he resists the tendency to reduce literary history to a history of schools or movements by explicitly stating that "Romanticism," "realism" and "symbolism" are ultimately determined by the same principles.<sup>44</sup> Against the modernist doxa, he provides a powerful counter-history of the literary and artistic developments prior to the rise of 'high modernism' at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. "So-called 'realism' is not the acme of the old representative order," Rancière brazenly asserts in *La politique de la littérature*, "but its destruction in actuality [*sa destruction en acte*]."<sup>45</sup> Second, by situating the work of authors like Hugo, Balzac, and Zola in the poetic doubling of the world of symbols, he aims at demonstrating that literature is by no means separate from society, but instead emerged as an *expression of society*.<sup>46</sup> In fact, he discards the very opposition between art for art's sake and social art, as well as the simplistic dichotomy between individual and society. The new idea of literature is that it is the language of societies and of their history, and that an individual—including the "creative genius"—can only produce literature by simultaneously acting as the witness to a particular people at a particular time. The individual expresses society and vice versa, in the same way that literature, even when it purports to only deal with itself, is the expression of the spirit of a people. The absolutization of the creative power of individual works of literature is founded on the same edifice as the cultural relativizing of literature as a social expression of a particular state of civilization. It is for this reason that—and this is the third point—the expressive regime of literature favored the emergence of the historical, sociological, and political sciences. Whereas representative poetics is normative in the broad sense insofar as it proposes general guidelines as to how poems should be produced, the expressive poetics of the new regime is historical and explains how they have been produced, in other words how they have expressed particular states of language and society. This novel hermeneutic framework, in which social and historical phenomena are understood as signs of a deeper, hidden reality, is precisely what allows for the new analysis of civilizations, cultures

and social mentalities. In brief, the expressive poetics of literature is also the historical poetics of the emerging social and human sciences:

In pursuing [my] work on literature in the nineteenth century, Rancière writes, I tried to show how many paradigms of history, sociology and the human sciences in general were first invented by literature and how the idea of a “new history” is invented by writers, by Hugo and Balzac, in opposing a history of manners [*une histoire des mœurs*], a history of the material life of mental attitudes [*mentalités*], to a history of events [*l'histoire événementielle*].<sup>47</sup>

Let us return to the fundamental contradictions of this new poetics, and the various reactions they have incited. Whereas Zola attempted to establish a compromise between the romantic expressivity of things and the causal narratives of the representative order, between the principle of expression and the principle of fiction, Gustave Flaubert undertook a daring identification between the two principles of romantic poetry: the principle of the indifference of style before subject matter and the principle of the necessary virtuality of language inherent in all things. By absolutizing style as a pure way of seeing things, he not only severed the representative link between the generic principle and the principle of decorum, but he also aimed at suppressing the contradiction of literature by tying the subjectivity of writing to the objectivity of vision. In so doing, however, the distinction between the prose of art and the prose of pure idiocy evaporates, and the principle of indifference ultimately destroys the principle of poetic difference. Like Bouvard and Pécuchet at the end of the eponymous novel, the writer is condemned to undo the very distinction he wanted to maintain, thereby disappearing into the idiotic chatter of the world, or what Stéphane Mallarmé called *l'universel reportage*. Flaubert resolves the contradiction of literature by identifying it with its opposite.

In order to reestablish its difference, and thereby save it from its prosaic abolition, Mallarmé takes up once again the contradictions constitutive of literature. The poetic act, for him, negates the chance circumstances of the world and thereby seeks to reconcile the contradictions of the expressive regime: the necessity of the idea is unveiled in any indifferent object or act. In other words, the contradiction between the antiprosaic principle of necessity and the anti-representative principle of indifference (as well as between the conscious and the unconscious, the signifying and the sensory) is united into the single poetic principle of the symbol as the unity of meaning and form. However, Mallarmé likewise encounters the same risk as Flaubert in attempting to resolve

the contradictions of literature: the risk of abolishing literature itself. By absolutizing poetry and extricating it from any material constraints, it can easily drift into the abstract realm of the spirit that no work can ever adequately capture. In order to save literature from its spiritual dissolution into the wordless purity of music and give it its proper space, Mallarmé has to establish its materiality. This is the origin of the project of the Book, which aims at nailing Spirit down on the material page. Such a typographic testimony to the specificity of literature cannot, however, avoid the perils of its dissolution. Indeed, the consecration of literature and the establishment of its difference from the banality of prose pushes the logic of the symbol to its extreme by making it at one and the same time a sign of thought and its body, a text to be interpreted and a drawing (at the risk of being neither). To preserve the spirit of literature, Mallarmé is forced to embody it in material forms whose very contingency runs the risk of negating it once again.

Faced with the romantic contradiction between the spiritual necessity of language and the indifference of form, Flaubert and Mallarmé propose opposite solutions. The former absolutizes style as a pure way of seeing that elevates the principle of indifference to the point of plunging poetry into the prosaic idiocy of the world. The latter distances himself from Flaubert's book on nothing by privileging the pure language of the Idea as the distinctive feature of a literature whose very writing risks dissolving itself into the arbitrariness of material forms. A dual dilemma is thereby encountered: on the one hand, the work of art loses itself in the indifferent materiality of the world, on the other hand, it dissipates into the pure realm of the spirit. Flaubert leads his reader to the abyss where literature is continuous with—and therefore indistinct from—the idle chatter of worldly prose, whereas Mallarmé confronts his reader with the mute realm of pure spirit delivered from material contingency. Meaningless chatter and profound silence are the two extreme limits of literature.

Surrealism and formalism revolve around the same fundamental problems, although their respective solutions are slightly different. Surrealism, like symbolism, valorizes the experience of a type of expression that returns to its originary source and turns the work of art over to the secret and eccentric realm of the spirit (*esprit*). It attacks the dead works of literature in the name of the forces of the mind (*esprit*). Formalism rejects the dissolution of the work into the mystical disorders of thought and seeks to establish the autonomy of the work of art by identifying literature with a different use of its material: words that are turned away from their common use. These two figures ultimately erase the internal contradiction of literature by fixing its terms at opposite poles: the unintentional work as a byproduct of the mind is opposed to the intentional work fabricated

by the witty craftsman of form. In attempting to master the contradiction between the principle of necessary form and the principle of indifferent content,<sup>48</sup> surrealism and formalism also displace the locus of literature away from the work itself and toward the speaker and his or her literary experience. The tensions inherent in the literary works of a Flaubert or a Mallarmé tend to give way to literary experiences of pure *pathos* and playful acts (brought together in the Deleuzian concept of *fabulation*).

Marcel Proust reactivates the contradictions of literature at precisely the moment when they were disappearing into formal games and the *pathos* of the mind. He reverses the contradiction between the necessity of form and the indifference of what is said by placing at the center of his novel a series of experiences, such as his joyful encounter with uneven paving stones or a *madeleine* dipped in tea, that are simultaneously essential and random. They are fortuitous as banal elements of sensation, but necessary by opening onto the depths of a spiritual universe they carry within them. Proust thereby discovers the resources for extricating literature from the dual cul-de-sac left by Flaubert and Mallarmé: the triviality of the subject matter that destroys the necessity of form and the purification of the idea that paralyzes writing. Proust offers the non-dialectical accomplishment of the dilemma at the heart of romantic poetics: he proves the existence of literature by revealing its contradiction and putting it to work at the center of his novel. The indifference of subject matter is brought together with the essentiality of language, and his novel is woven out of a constant back-and-forth between the materiality of the work and the spirituality of the mind, the triviality of the commonplace and the necessity of meaning, the artifice of the intentional and the *pathos* of the unintentional. Proust thereby saves literature from the two extremes where it disappears: the absolutization of prose that destroys the difference proper to literature and the generalized poetics that dissolves poetry into spirit. However, if literature continues to exist, it is not because its contradictions have been resolved. Quite to the contrary, it is precisely because they have been recognized as the very principles of literature's existence and have once again been put to work.

## QUESTIONS FOR THE CURIOUS

In spite of the prowess expressed on every page of this book, the inquisitive reader cannot but be left with a number of important questions, some of which I have touched upon above. What are we to make, for instance, of the general privilege accorded to French literature, and particularly to the sequence

Hugo-Balzac-Zola-Flaubert-Mallarmé-Proust? In combination with the German Romantics, these are clearly the authors that dominate the history of literature as it is presented in *Mute Speech*. Cervantes, Vico and other European figures do indeed play a significant role, but the long nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are quintessentially French and German.<sup>49</sup> Does Rancière's study therefore suffer from *historical hegemony* in the same way as Sartre's *What Is Literature?* Is he elevating a *particular* history—the history of the German Romantics and modern French literature—to the *general* status of *the* history of literature? It is true that in his other work he has explored in greater depth the role of English literature, and he has written poignant analyses of figures as diverse as Tolstoy, Emerson and Borges. At the same time, anyone familiar with his writings cannot ignore the absolute centrality of Flaubert, Mallarmé and Proust. Surely this is in part due to his background and the fact that he was educated in the French cultural context. Nonetheless, an explicit justification beyond the contingencies of birth would certainly lend further credibility to his project.<sup>50</sup>

There is also room to question the valorization of literature itself as what appears to be the determinant in the last instance of a vast number of cultural and intellectual developments over the last two hundred years. The emergence of sociology, political science, modern history, photography, film, the avant-garde, what is inappropriately called postmodernism, and many other cultural phenomena all trace their origins back to the appearance of literature and the genesis of the aesthetic regime of art. Why is literature given this privileged role as the harbinger of the hermeneutic, artistic and theoretical framework of the modern age? What are the grounds—if any—for such a privileged role? Moreover, where does literature itself come from and why exactly does it emerge? Although Rancière fastidiously describes the silent revolution in the distribution of the sensible stretching back to Cervantes and Vico, he has yet to provide a robust genetic or genealogical account detailing the forces that facilitated and fostered the developments he describes. Wouldn't Sartre's critical claim that Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, had replaced “cinema by the magic lantern, movement by a succession of immobilities,” equally apply to *Mute Speech* insofar as the emergence of the new, expressive poetics is simply described with little or no etiological account?<sup>51</sup> Of course, Rancière's magic lantern show includes superimposed images and the rival poetics do contain a certain amount of internal movement. Nevertheless, the reader is left wondering *why* there is a shift from representative poetics to expressive poetics.

Rancière clearly does not want to argue that it was simply the work of a few creative geniuses since, as we have seen, he dismantles the very opposition between society and the individual by explaining that the figure of the creative

genius was a figure who best expressed a particular state of society. The suggestion, at a certain level, is that the emergence of literature is linked to a particular historical conjuncture. However, since Rancière does not want to reduce literature to a series of external determinants, he establishes a more or less distant analogy between the appearance of literature and the development of “democracy.” Indeed, he claims that literature and democracy share the same basic principles since they disrupt ordered hierarchies and the structured relationship between discourses and bodies.<sup>52</sup> Democracy, in fact, is identified as the regime of writing, as the egalitarian regime in which discourse freely circulates between anyone and everyone. In his other writings, Rancière has made this connection much more explicit. Consider, for instance, his description of the relationship between the emergence of aesthetics (and, therefore, the appearance of literature) and “democratic” revolutions:

Contemporary with the American and French Revolutions, aesthetics appeared at a point of rupture as that which defines of the sensible capacity of anyone and everyone [*la capacité sensible de n’importe qui*]. This capacity is parallel to the political definition, by the law, of the abilities of anyone and everyone [*des capacités de n’importe qui*], but it proposed another idea of equality [*une autre idée de l’égalité*], at work not only in the law but also in the concrete forms of life.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, this analogy remains a distant analogy for at least one very important reason: the equality of literature is *not* the equality of democracy. As Rancière has explained in his other writings, democracy properly understood is an intervention in the police distribution of the sensible—the established order of perception, discourse and action—that seeks to verify the presupposition of equality. Literature is *not* political in this sense. On the contrary, the equality of all things in literature—in its motley and assorted forms—can, and often does, inhibit democratic equality in the true sense of the term.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, the proximity between democracy and literature is situated at the level of the shared issue of equality. But if they are close *in principle*, they are *in fact* very distant.

This brings us to the fundamental problem of principled history, or the attempt to give an account of cultural developments in terms of a series of competing principles that purport to explain the totality of the facts. We have already seen the extent to which Rancière seeks to nuance his account of the various principles of representative and expressive poetics by emphasizing the complexity of their diverse relationships. At the same time, the reader cannot but be struck by the way in which the conflict between two key principles in the

new poetics of expressivity—the principle of the necessity of language and the principle of the indifference of style—structures the battles of literary discourse from Hugo to the present. This contradiction is by no means the only one that Rancière underscores (on the contrary, his incessant dialectical rhetoric overturns, segments and problematizes oppositions *ad nauseam*). However, it does come to function as an enormous Gordian knot at the heart of literary history, as if the artists and writers of the poetics of expressivity were all grappling with the same fundamental problem: the contradiction between necessity and indifference, between spirit and body. Moreover, this contradiction has apparently produced a negative dialectic driving literary history as it moves from the extreme of material indifference in Flaubert to the opposite extreme of purified spiritual necessity in Mallarmé, and finally to Proust's enormous accomplishment of discovering spiritual necessity within the arbitrary and random material of sensations (without, however, resolving the contradictions of expressivity). In this light, the history of literature resembles a negative dialectic of mind and body, of disembodiment and incarnation, of spiritualization and materialization.<sup>55</sup> Leaving aside the detailed, in-depth analyses of each of the authors Rancière works on, which should be judged in their own right, the careful reader must be wary of the lingering shadows of a principled history structured by a negative dialectic between irreconcilable extremes. Indeed, it could be argued that Rancière has simply rejected competing versions of modernity in favor of his own idiosyncratic interpretation of modernism as a contradictory poetics that has displaced the orderly, classical poetics of representation.<sup>56</sup> The question must be raised, therefore, of whether or not the artistic and literary developments of the last few hundred years can be brought back to an endless battle between two incompatible principles, and thus to the overall issue of the problematic incarnation of the Word.<sup>57</sup>

The risks of such historical logicism are numerous. To begin with, it is very difficult to provide nuanced accounts of specific configurations within the arts if everything needs to be related to a set of historical principles. For instance, the descriptions that Rancière has provided of the emergence of film or of the avant-garde inevitably exclude certain crucial features of these developments in his attempt to situate them within the framework of the contradictions of literature.<sup>58</sup> Although Rancière has a rare and unique ability to mediate between the generalities of history and the particulars of individual works of art, he often has to fall back on an appeal to principles, through more or less painful forms of dialectical acrobatics, as his alembicated style attempts to show that almost anything can be wrung from a single Gordian knot. This is at the expense of an analysis of the specificities of practices and institutions in the broadest sense

of the term.<sup>59</sup> In spite of some important passing references, Rancière has not provided an account of the role of institutions such as the museum, the university, and the library, not to mention the reconfiguration of cultural space in the modern era, the explosion of literacy rates, the real circulation of the written word through the press boom in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the development of a new readership in the nineteenth century, the transformation of the juridical order and intellectual property, changes in the social imaginary around the figure of the artist, the emergence of the nation-state, the national unification of languages, the economic autonomy of artists, etc. Obviously, it would be short-sighted to demand of Rancière an authoritative account of all of these factors. However, it is justified to ask that he ground the contradictions of literature in something other than a set of incompatible intellectual principles.

The abandonment of radical historicism in the name of a convoluted history of fixed concepts constitutes an additional risk. If literary history is ultimately driven by a set of principles and their contradictions, then Rancière discretely adopts the position of selective historicism: he chooses what escapes historical change (the principles themselves, at least once they have appeared) and what does not (the various attempts to come to terms with these principles). The factual history of specific practices is thereby situated on the firm footing of more or less stable principles. Indeed, history itself runs the risk of simply becoming the incessant redeployment of *the same things*. It is for this reason that Laurent Jenny has suggested that literature actually has no history (after it appears) for Rancière because its development is simply the unfolding of its internal contradiction.<sup>60</sup> Of course, as Rancière claimed in his response to Jenny, there are changes in literary history insofar as this contradiction productively gives birth to an infinite number of possible inventions.<sup>61</sup> However, we must ask if this is anything more than an illustration of the fact that there are many different ways to tie the same Gordian knot.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rancière provides in this book one of the most powerful counter-histories of the modern era to be written in decades. He has jettisoned with such erudite fervor the dominant historical narratives and the paradigmatic readings of so many schools and individual authors that his work runs the risk of being not only misunderstood but partially ignored. In fact, it is not only the content of his analyses that work against the grain of history, but also their methodological form. The decision to engage in a close immanent interpretation of a historical

archive stretching well beyond the standard literary corpus to include worker poets, philosophers, sociologists, and historians, will certainly disturb more than one reader. His indifference to disciplinary boundaries goes hand in hand with his iconoclastic subversion of the modernist doxa, which has become the comforting reference point for so many of those who deal directly or indirectly with the history of art and literature. Since the easiest way to engage with this book is to place it on the shelf next to the myriad of other attempts to schematize the relationship between classicism and modernism, it runs the risk of quietly merging into what “we all already know.”

However, for the reader who agrees to try and shelve the doctrines of modernism in the name of following Rancière into unchartered territory, the rewards are innumerable. The strengths of his project are too numerous to be summarized, but here is a partial list:

He approximates a radical historicist position that avoids blindly positing art as a transhistorical absolute.

He jettisons both continuous and discontinuous modes of history in order to propose a unique account of overlapping poetics.

He avoids reducing rival poetics to homogenous epistemes and instead argues that axioms from the same poetics can come into contradiction, and that there can be overlap and tension with other poetics.

Far from proposing a purely descriptive account of history, he advocates an interventionist and polemical approach that attempts to simultaneously restage the singularity of the past and have it come to bear on the present.

Instead of reducing works of art to determinate schemata, he argues that works endeavor to solve problems posed by specific poetic axioms.

Rather than unapologetically imposing his conceptual system on works of art, he provides an immanent analysis of the works themselves in order to draw out their consequences and their operative principles.

He provides an extremely novel and original account of the history of the arts since the Renaissance, which is as erudite as it is polemical and iconoclastic. Perhaps most importantly, Rancière launches a major offensive against the modernist doxa (and its postmodernist avatars) and encourages his readers to rethink their most fundamental presuppositions. He thereby opens space for a radically new understanding of the history of the arts and literature, if not the history of politics and of the social and human sciences.

As should be clear from the preceding section, I have a number of important reservations about Rancière’s project, and I would encourage any critical reader

to work through the material on their own. However, I also recognize the profound nature of his contribution: he has attempted to more or less single-handedly dismantle what is arguably *the* dominant historical paradigm for thinking the history of the arts. This is no small task, for it not only requires developing alternative historiographical and interpretive strategies, but it also necessitates a close and detailed analysis of the major (and minor) works of the European tradition. If the reader is reticent to embrace his novel account of the arts, let it not be because of the ways in which it distances itself from the art historical narratives that have become so familiar. Rancière has provided an extraordinary service to all of those who seek to critically engage with the arts by stalwartly rejecting the complacent imagery of the modernist mirror, which serves to reflect the narcissistic image of those who would like to see themselves as standing at the end of a historical progression leading directly to themselves. In return, we can, at the very least, recognize the unique nature of Rancière's undertaking and heed his call to move *through the looking glass*.

\* \* \*

# INTRODUCTION

## FROM ONE LITERATURE TO ANOTHER

**T**HERE ARE some questions we no longer dare pose. Recently an eminent literary theorist said that one would have to have no fear of ridicule to call a book *What is Literature?* Sartre, who did write a book with that title in a time that already seems so far from us, at least had the wisdom not to answer the question. For, as Gérard Genette tells us, “a foolish question does not require an answer; by the same token, true wisdom might consist in not asking it at all.”<sup>1</sup>

How exactly should we understand this wisdom in the conditional mood? Is the question foolish because everyone has a pretty good idea of what literature is? Or on the contrary, because the idea is too vague to ever become the object of a determinate knowledge? Does the conditional invite us to free ourselves from yesterday’s false questions? Or does it rather wax ironical about how naive it would be to consider ourselves free from it once and for all? In fact this is probably not a real choice. Today’s wisdom happily combines the expert’s practice of demystification with the Pascalian twist that denounces both deception and the illusion of not being deceived. It renders vague notions invalid in theory but reestablishes them for practical use. It derides questions but still offers answers. It shows us that in the end things cannot be

anything other than what they are, but also that we can do no less than add our own illusions to them.

This wisdom nonetheless leaves many questions unanswered. The first is why some ideas can be both so vague and so well known, so easy to make concrete and so likely to engender haze. Here we might propose some distinctions. There are two sorts of ideas that we think we understand why they must remain indeterminate. First, there are commonly used ideas whose precise meaning depends on the context in which they are used and which lose any validity when separated from that context. Second, there are ideas concerning transcendental reality that are situated outside the field of our experience and that refuse to submit to either verification or falsification. But “literature” does not seem to belong to either of these categories. It is thus worthwhile to ask what singular properties affect this idea to the point of making it seem either desperate or ridiculous to ask what its essence is. Above all, we must consider whether this assertion of futility is not itself a consequence of the presupposition that the determinate properties of a thing can be separated from the “ideas” people have about it.

A convenient solution would be to say that the concept of literature does not define any class of constant properties but is instead subject to the arbitrary character of individual or institutional appreciations. As John Searle affirms, “whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide.”<sup>2</sup> But it might turn out to be more interesting to investigate the conditions of possibility of such a principle of indifference and recourse to conditionality. Gérard Genette responds quite rightly to Searle that *Britannicus*, for example, is not part of literature on account of the pleasure it provides me or that I attribute to its readership and audience. Genette proposes a distinction between two criteria of literariness: a conditional criterion, which resides in the perception of a particular quality of a piece of writing, and a conventional criterion, which resides in the genre of the piece of writing itself. A text belongs to literature in a “constitutive” way if it cannot belong to any other category of beings: This is the case for odes and tragedies, whatever their quality. On the other hand, a text belongs to literature in a “conditional” way if all that distinguishes it from the functional class to which it belongs—such as memoirs or travel narratives—is the perception of a particular quality of expression.

The application of these criteria, however, is not self-evident. *Britannicus*, says Genette, belongs to literature not on account of a judgment about its value but simply “because it is a play.”<sup>3</sup> But the self-evidence of this deduction is false. There exists no criterion, whether universal or historical, that provides a foundation for the inclusion of the genre “theater” in the genre “literature.” Theater is a kind of spectacle, not a genre of literature. Genette’s proposition would have

been incomprehensible to Racine's contemporaries, for whom the only correct inference would have been that *Britannicus* is a tragedy, which obeys the laws of the genre and thus belongs to the genre of which the dramatic poem itself is a subdivision, namely poetry. But it is not part of "literature," which for them was the name of a field of knowledge and not an art. We, on the contrary, consider it part of literature for two closely connected reasons. In the first place, Racine's tragedies have taken a place, between Bossuet's *Eulogies*—which belong to the genre of oratory—and Montaigne's *Essays*—which have no identifiable generic nature—in a pantheon of great writers, a canon of selected works constituted not by the stage but by the book and the classroom. They are moreover examples of a very specific theatrical genre: theater of a sort that is no longer written, a dead genre, whose works are for that very reason the privileged material for a new artistic genre called "mise-en-scène" and whose labor is commonly identified with a "rereading" of the work. In short, it is part of literature not as a play but as a "classical tragedy," according to a retrospective status that the Romantic period invented for it by inventing a new "idea" of "literature."

It is thus quite true that it is not our individual and arbitrary choice that decides that *Britannicus* is "literary." But neither is it its generic nature, insofar as it guided Racine's work and his contemporaries' judgments. The reasons *Britannicus* is part of literature are not the same as the reasons it is part of poetry. But this difference does not leave us with something arbitrary or unknowable. The two systems of reasons can be reconstructed if only we give up the convenient position that so easily separates positive properties from speculative ideas. Our age gladly takes pride in the relativist wisdom it thinks it has wrested from the seductions of metaphysics. We think that we have learned to reduce the overburdened terms "art" and "literature" to the empirically definable characteristics of artistic practices and aesthetic behaviors. But this relativism may in fact be short-sighted, and it would be worthwhile to invite it to continue on to the point where it would itself be relativized, that is, reinscribed in the network of possible statements belonging to a system of reasons. The "relativity" of artistic practices is in fact that of the historicity of the arts. This historicity is never simply that of modes of doing, but rather that of the link between modes of doing and modes of saying. It is convenient to oppose the prosaic practices of the arts to the absolutizations of the discourse of Art. But this respectable empiricism's self-limitation to the "simple practices" of the arts has only been possible since the absolute discourse of Art leveled them when it abolished the old hierarchies of the *Beaux-arts*. The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices.

Rather than abandoning the phenomenon of literature to the relativism that notes the absence of a certain type of properties and concludes that humor and convention reign, we ought to ask what conceptual configuration of the phenomenon makes this sort of inference possible. We must diligently reconstruct the logic that makes “literature” a notion that is both so obvious and so poorly determined. Thus we will take “literature” to mean neither the vague idea of the repertory of written works nor the idea of a particular essence that makes these works worthy of being called “literary.” Henceforth, we will use the term to designate the historical mode of visibility of the works of the art of writing that produces this gap and, as a consequence, the discourses that theorize it: both those that consecrate the incomparable essence of literary creation and those that deconsecrate it in order to reduce it to either arbitrary judgments or positive criteria of classification.<sup>4</sup>

In order to bring the question into focus, let us begin with two discourses on literature, composed two centuries apart by two men of letters both of whom combined a practice of the art of writing with a philosophical reflection on its principles. Voltaire, in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, already castigated the indetermination of the word “literature.” It is, he says, “one of those vague words so common in all languages” that, like “spirit” or “philosophy,” can be given the most diverse meanings. But this initial reservation does not prevent him from advancing, on his own behalf, a definition that he declares valid for all of Europe, that is, for the entire continent of thought. Literature, he explains, is the equivalent among the Moderns of what the Ancients called “grammar”: “in all of Europe it designates a knowledge of works of taste, a smattering of history, poetry, eloquence, and criticism.”<sup>5</sup>

Here now are a few lines drawn from a contemporary author, Maurice Blanchot, who for his part takes care not to “define” literature, since he understands it precisely as an infinite movement of reversion upon its own question. Let us thus consider the following lines as one of the formulations of this movement toward itself that constitutes literature: “a literary work is, for one who knows how to penetrate it, a rich resting place of silence, a firm defense and a high wall against this eloquent immensity that addresses itself to us by turning us away from ourselves. If, in this imaginary Tibet, where the sacred signs could no longer be discovered in anyone, all literature stopped speaking, what would be lacking is silence, and it is this lack of silence that would perhaps reveal the disappearance of literary language.”<sup>6</sup>

Are Voltaire’s definition and Blanchot’s sentences, however minimally, talking about the same thing? The first gives an account of a form of knowledge, partly erudite and partly amateur, that allows one to speak as a connoisseur of

belles lettres. The second, under the heading of stone, the desert and the sacred, invokes a radical experience of language that is pledged to the production of a silence. The only thing these two texts, which seem to belong to separate and non-communicating universes, have in common is their distance from what everyone knows perfectly well: literature as the collection of the productions of the art of speaking and writing, which includes, following the subdivisions of historical periods and linguistic domains, the *Iliad* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Niebelungen*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Voltaire speaks of a knowledge that allows normative judgments of the beauties and defects of existing works, Blanchot of an experience of the possibility and impossibility of writing, to which works are only the testimony.

It might be said that these two gaps are not of the same nature and should be explained separately. Between the common definition and Blanchot's text, there is the gap between the ordinary use of a broad notion and the particular conceptualization grafted onto it by a personal theory. Between Voltaire's definition and our ordinary usage or Blanchot's extraordinary usage, there is the historical reality of a shift in the meaning of words: in the eighteenth century, the word literature designated not works of art but rather the knowledge that appreciated them.

Voltaire's definition is indeed inscribed within the evolution of the *res litteraria* that signified, during the Renaissance and the century of Louis XIV, the scholarly knowledge of the writings of the past, whether poetry or mathematics, natural history or rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> The *littérateurs* of the seventeenth century may well have disdained the art of Corneille or Racine. Voltaire pays them back in kind by distinguishing the *littérateur* from the poet:

Homer was a genius, Zoilus a *littérateur*. Corneille was a genius; a journalist who writes reviews of his masterpieces is a man of literature. The distinction of the works of a poet, an orator, or a historian is not conveyed by the vague term literature, even though their authors can display the most varied learning, and posses all that is understood by letters. Racine, Boileau, Bossuet, and Fénelon, who had more *literature* than their critics, would be very improperly called men of letters or *littérateurs*.<sup>8</sup>

On the one side there is the ability to produce works of belles lettres, the poetry of Racine and Corneille, the eloquence and history of Fénelon or Bossuet; on the other side, there is the knowledge of authors. Two traits give this knowledge an ambiguous status: it oscillates between the scholarly erudition and the taste of connoisseurs who distinguish the beauties and defects of the works

presented to the judgment of the public; it also oscillates between a positive knowledge of the norms of art and a negative qualification in which the *littérateur* becomes the shadow and the parasite of the creator. As a *littérateur*, Voltaire judges, scene by scene, the language and action of Corneille's heroes. As an *anti-littérateur*, he imposes the viewpoint of Corneille and Racine: Let the amateurs experience their pleasure and leave the task of working out the difficulties of Aristotle to authors.

It might be argued that Voltaire's definition, in the very restriction it gives to the term, by centering literary knowledge on the works of belles lettres, testifies to the slow shift that leads literature toward its modern meaning, and that it participates in the valorization of the creative genius that will give Romanticism and a "literature" emancipated from the rules its slogan. For the superiority of genius over the rules is not the discovery of the young men of Victor Hugo's day. The "old dunce" Batteux, who symbolizes for Hugo the dusty norms of yesteryear, had established it clearly: The work exists only through the fire of enthusiasm that animates the artist, by its capacity to "pass" into the things he creates. And at the dawn of the Romantic century, the exemplary representative of the past century and the poetics of yesteryear, La Harpe, explained without any difficulty that genius is the instinctive feeling for what the rules command, and the rules simply the codification of what genius does.<sup>9</sup> Thus the passage from belles lettres to literature seems to occur through a revolution slow enough to have no need of being noticed. Batteux already did not think he needed to comment on the equivalence he established between a "course of belles lettres" and a "course of literature." Neither Marmontel nor La Harpe were to feel anymore need to justify the use of the word "literature" or to specify its object. La Harpe began his Lycée courses in 1787 and published his *Cours* in 1803. Between these two dates Voltaire's disciple was a revolutionary, a Montagnard, a Thermidorian, and finally a Catholic reactionary; the *Cours* bears the traces of events and his recantations. But at no moment does it discuss the silent revolution that occurred in the shadow of the political one: Between the beginning and the end of the *Cours de littérature*, the very meaning of the word changed. The publishers who interminably reprinted Marmontel and La Harpe during the age of Hugo, Balzac, and Flaubert were no more concerned with the problem. But this is equally true of the writers whose books chart the new geography of the literary domain in the first years of the new century. More than the criteria by which works are appreciated, Mme. de Staël and Barante, Sismondi and August Schlegel overturn the relations between art, language, and society that circumscribe the literary universe; they expel yesterday's glories from this universe and include forgotten continents. But not one of them thinks it of interest to comment on the evolution of the word itself.<sup>10</sup> Not

even Hugo in his most iconoclastic declarations. The posterity of both writers and professors of rhetoric and literature will follow them on this point.

This argument would see, between Voltaire's definition and ours, only a lexical shift accompanying a silent revolution. As for Blanchot's metaphors, they stem from a different gap, the reasons for which the positivism of our age has no trouble whatsoever diagnosing. The wall and Tibet, the desert and the sacred spoken of in our text, like the experience of night, suicide, and the concept of the "neutral" set forth in so many others, have entirely identifiable sources. They refer to the consecration of literature whose great priests, in France, are Flaubert and Mallarmé, to the desertification of writing implied by the Flaubertian project of a book about nothing, to the nocturnal encounter between the unconditional exigency of writing and nothingness implied by the Mallarméan project of the Book. They express, in this account, the absolutization of art proclaimed by visionary young German thinkers around 1800: Hölderlin's mission of the poet as mediator, Schlegel's absolutization of the "poetry of poetry," Hegel's identification of aesthetics with the unfolding of the concept of the Absolute, Novalis's affirmation of the intransitivity of a language that is "only concerned with itself." Finally, through the mediation of Schelling's philosophy of the indeterminate, they would reach back to Jacob Böhme's theosophy and the tradition of negative theology, pledging literature to testimony of its own impossibility, just as negative theology was dedicated to expressing the ineffability of the divine attributes.<sup>11</sup> Blanchot's speculations on literary experience, his reference to sacred signs, and his decor of deserts and walls would be possible only because, two centuries ago, the poetry of Novalis, the poetics of the Schlegel brothers, and the philosophy of Hegel and Schelling irremediably confounded art and philosophy—together with religion and law, physics and politics—in the same night of the absolute.

Whatever insights they may allow, these arguments always and in the end leave us with the rather hasty conclusion that people get illusions into their heads by virtue of the human predilection for illusion and, particularly, the affection of poets for sonorous words and of metaphysicians for transcendental ideas. It would perhaps be more interesting to try to understand why people—and what sort of people—get these illusions "into their heads." Even more, we ought to question the very operation that separates the positive from the illusory and the presuppositions of this operation. We cannot but be surprised by the exact coincidence between the moment when the simple shift in the meaning of the word "literature" is completed and the moment of elaboration of the philosophico-poetic speculations that, all the way to the present, will sustain literature's claim to be an unheard-of and radical exercise of thought and language,

perhaps even a social calling and priesthood. Unless we are willing to give in to the currently widespread paranoia that sees, in the final years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth, the complicity of French revolutionaries and German dreamers in overturning everything reasonable and ushering in two centuries of theoretical and political madness, we must seek a little more precisely what links the quiet shift in a name to the installation of a theoretical decor that permits an identification of the theory of literature with the theory of language and its practice with a production of silence. We must see what renders simultaneously possible the silent revolution that changes the meaning of a word, the conceptual absolutizations of language, art, and literature that are grafted on to it, *and* the theories that oppose them to one another. As a historical mode of visibility of the works of the art of writing, literature is the system of this simultaneous possibility.

Thus are the object and the order of this book defined. We will first seek to analyze the nature and modalities of the change in paradigm that ruins the normative system of belles lettres, and to understand, on this basis, why the same revolution can be both imperceptible and absolute. We will find the reason for this in the particular character of this revolution, which does not change the norms of representative poetics in favor of other norms, but in favor of another interpretation of the poetic fact. This new interpretation can be simply superimposed on the existence of works as another idea of what they do and what they mean. But it can also, and on the contrary, bind together in principle the act of writing with the realization of this new idea and define the necessity of a new art.

In a second moment, we will interrogate the coherence of the new paradigm itself. Emancipated “literature” has two great principles. In opposition to the norms of representative poetics, it proclaims the indifference of the form with respect to its content. In opposition to the idea of poetry as fiction, it proclaims poetry to be a specific mode of language. Are these two principles compatible? Both, to be sure, promote an art that is properly speaking an art of writing in opposition to the old *mimesis* of speech in action. But then the concept of writing is split in two: It can be orphaned speech lacking a body that might accompany it and attest to it, or, on the contrary, it can be a hieroglyph that bears its idea upon its body. The contradiction of literature might very well be the tension between these two ideas of writing.

We will then seek to show the forms this tension takes in the work of three authors whose names commonly symbolize the absolutization of literature: Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust.<sup>12</sup> Literature’s contradictions are stripped bare by Flaubert’s attempt to write a “book about nothing,” Mallarmé’s project of a

writing proper to the Idea, and Proust's novel about the formation of the novelist. But their necessary and productive character becomes manifest as well. The impasses of literary absolutization do not stem from a contradiction that would make the idea of literature incoherent; in fact they occur precisely at the point where literature affirms its coherence. By studying the forms of theoretical expression and the modalities of practical realization of this paradox, we can perhaps find a way out of the dilemma of relativism and absolutism, and offer, in opposition to the conventional wisdom of relativism, the skepticism in action of an art that is capable of playing with its own idea and creating a work out of its own contradiction.



FROM RESTRICTED TO GENERAL POETICS

PART I



# CHAPTER 1

## FROM REPRESENTATION TO EXPRESSION

LET US return to the stone wall and refuge of silence. Blanchot, in fact, did not invent the metaphors he uses to celebrate the purity of literary experience, and the valorization of purity is not their only possible use. These same metaphors have often served to denounce the perversion inherent in that purity. They thus structure Sartre's arguments expressing both fascination and contempt for Flaubert and Mallarmé. Sartre continually denounces Flaubert's infatuation with poems in dead languages, "words of stone falling from the lips of statues," or the Mallarméan poem's "column of silence blossoming alone in some secluded garden." He valorizes a literature of expository speech, in which the word serves as an intermediary between an author and a reader, in opposition to a literature in which the means becomes an end, in which speech is no longer the act of a subject but a mute soliloquy: "Language is present when someone speaks, otherwise it is dead—words neatly arranged in a dictionary. These poems uttered by no one, which seem like bouquets of flowers or arrangements of jewels selected for their harmonizing colors, are in fact pure silence."<sup>1</sup> We might think that Sartre is responding to Blanchot and, therefore, quite naturally uses his vocabulary. But this critique of literary "petrification" has a much longer history. When Sartre denounces,

from a political and revolutionary viewpoint, the sacrifice of human speech and action to the prestige of a petrified language, he paradoxically takes up the accusations that the literary and political traditionalists of the nineteenth century continually leveled against each generation of literary innovators. Whether in opposition to the images of Hugolian “Romanticism,” the descriptions of Flaubertian “realism,” or the arabesques of Mallarméan “symbolism,” it was always the primacy of living and acting speech that the traditionalists upheld. In *What is Literature?*, Sartre sets up an opposition between a poetry that uses words intransitively, as a painter uses colors, and a literature that uses words to show and to prove. This opposition between an art that paints and an art that demonstrates was similarly already a leitmotiv of nineteenth-century criticism. It is the argument Charles de Rémusat made against Hugo when he denounced a literature that “ceases to serve as the instrument of a fruitful idea and isolates itself from the causes it ought to defend [...] in order to become an art that is independent of anything it might express, a particular, *suigeneris* power that looks only within itself for its life, its goals, and its glory.” Barbey d’Aurevilly made the argument against Flaubert: the realist “only wants painterly books” and rejects “any book whose purpose is to *prove* something.” Finally, this argument is also at the core of Léon Bloy’s great denunciation of the “literary idolatry” that sacrifices the Verb to the cult of the sentence.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand this recurrent denunciation of literary “petrification” and its metamorphoses, we must thus break through the convenient barrier erected by Sartre between the pantheist naivety of the Romantic age, when “animals spoke and books were taken down directly from the lips of God,” and the post-1848 disenchantment of disabused aesthetes. We must grasp this theme at its origin, in the very moment when the power of speech immanent in every living being and the power of life immanent in every stone are first affirmed.

Let us begin at the beginning, that is, the battle over “Romanticism.” The first thing that got the partisans of Voltaire and La Harpe riled up against Hugo was not the “hidden/staircase [*escalier/dérobe*]” and other enjambments of *Hernani* or the “liberty cap” he put on the old dictionary. It was the identification of the power of the poem with that of a language of stone. Witness the incisive analysis given by Gustave Planche of the work that, much more than *Hernani*, symbolizes the scandal of the new school, *Notre-Dame de Paris*:

In this unique and monstrous work, man and stone come together and form a single body. Man beneath the ogive is like moss on a wall or lichen on an oak. Under Monsieur Hugo’s pen, stone comes to life and seems to follow all human passions. The imagination, dazzled at first, believes it

is witnessing the expansion of the realm of thought and the conquest of matter by intelligent life. But it is soon undeceived, seeing that matter has remained as it was but that man has been petrified. The guivres and salamanders carved on the cathedral's walls have remained immobile while the blood that had flowed in man's veins suddenly froze; his breathing stopped, the eye no longer sees and the free agent has fallen to the level of stone without having raised it toward himself.<sup>3</sup>

The “petrification” spoken of by Hugo's critic does not stem from a posture the writer may have adopted, a choice to silence his voice. Properly speaking, it is the opposition of one poetics to another, an opposition that expresses the break of *Romantic* novelty not only with the formal rules of belles lettres but with their very spirit. What opposes these two poetics is a different idea of the relation between thought and matter that constitutes the poem and of the language that is the site of this relation. If we refer back to the classical terms of poetics—the *inventio* that concerns the choice of subject, the *dispositio* that arranges its parts, and the *elocutio* that gives the discourse its appropriate ornaments—the new poetics that triumphs in Hugo's novel can be characterized as an overturning of the system that gave them order and hierarchy. Classical *inventio* defined the poem, in Aristotle's terms, as an arrangement of actions, a representation of men in action. It is important that we see clearly the implications of the strange procedure of putting the cathedral in the place of the arrangement of human actions. *Notre-Dame de Paris* certainly does tell a story, knots together and then resolves the destiny of its characters. But the title of the book is not thereby merely an indication of the time and place where the story occurs. It defines these adventures as another incarnation of what the cathedral itself expresses in the distribution of its spaces and the iconography or relief of its sculptures. It stages its characters as figures drawn from the stone and the meaning it incarnates. To accomplish this Hugo's sentences animate the stone, make it speak and act. If *elocution* formerly was subject to *inventio*, giving the represented agents of the action the expression appropriate to their character and their circumstances, it now emancipates itself from this tutelage, to the profit of the power of speech granted to the new object of the poem, and takes its mistress's place. But, as Planche tells us, this omnipotence of language is also a reversal of its internal hierarchy: henceforth it will be the “material part” of language—words with their sonorous and imagistic power—that takes the place of the “intellectual part”—the syntax that subordinates those words to the expression of thought and to the logical order of an action.

Planche's analysis allows us to understand what is at stake in Hugolian “petrification,” namely the overturning of a poetic system. It also allows us to

reconstitute the system thus reversed, the system of representation, as it had been set forth during the preceding century in treatises by Batteux, Marmontel, and La Harpe, or as it inspired Voltaire's commentaries on Corneille. The system of representation in fact consisted less in formal rules than in their spirit, that is, in a particular idea of the relations between speech and action. Four great principles animated the poetics of representation. The first, established in the first chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics*, is the principle of fiction. The essence of the poem is not found in the use of a more or less harmonious metrical regularity but in the fact that it is an imitation, a representation of actions. In other words, the poem cannot be defined as a mode of language. A poem is a story, and its value or deficiency consists in the conception of this story. This principle founds the generality of *poetics* as a norm for the arts generally. If poetry and painting can be compared with one another, it is not because we could consider painting as a kind of language and assimilate the painter's colors to the poet's words. It is rather because both of them tell a story, which can be analyzed in terms of the fundamental common norms of *inventio* and *dispositio*. The primacy of the "arrangement of actions" that defines the fable also provides the foundation for the casual way critics and translators treat the linguistic form of the work, notably in the license translators take in transposing verse into prose, or resetting it in verse forms more common to their own nation and age. La Harpe objected when La Motte transposed the first act of *Mithridate* into prose in order to demonstrate that metrics was merely an obstacle to the communication of ideas and sentiments. But one of the exercises most commonly assigned to students in order to form their style—and this would remain true well into the nineteenth century—was to transpose verse fables into prose. What constitutes a poem is in the first place the consistency of an idea set into fiction.

There is a second aspect to the principle of fiction, which is that it presupposes a specific space-time in which the fiction is offered and appreciated as such. This seems obvious: Aristotle does not need to spell it out, and it still goes without saying in the age of belles lettres. But by then the fragility of this distribution had been demonstrated by a fictional hero: Don Quixote who, in breaking Master Peter's puppets, refused to recognize the specific space-time in which one acts as if one believes in stories one does not believe. Don Quixote is not simply the hero of defunct chivalry and imagination gone mad; he is also the hero of the novelistic form itself, the hero of a mode of fiction that places its own status in peril. It is true that such confrontations between novelistic heroes and puppeteers belong to a world about which the order of belles lettres has nothing to say. But it is not for nothing that the new literature will adopt Don Quixote as its hero.

Next comes the generic principle. It is not enough for a fiction to announce itself as such—it must also conform to a genre. What defines a genre, however, is not a set of formal rules but the nature of what is represented, the object of the fiction. Once again it was Aristotle who set forth the principle in the first books of the *Poetics*: The genre of a poem—epic or satire, tragedy or comedy—is above all linked to the nature of what it represents. There are fundamentally two sorts of people (and two sorts of actions) that can be imitated: the great and the small. Likewise there are two sorts of people who imitate—noble spirits and common spirits—and two ways of imitating—one that elevates the object imitated and another that lowers it. Imitators with nobility of soul choose to represent the striking actions of the great, the heroes and the gods, and to represent them with the highest degree of formal perfection that they can attain: these imitators become epic or tragic poets. Imitators of lesser virtue choose to tell little stories about lowly people or reprove the vices of mediocre beings, and they become comic or satiric poets.

A fiction belongs to a genre. A genre is defined by the subject represented. The subject takes its place in a scale of values that defines the hierarchy of genres. The subject represented ties the genre to one of two fundamental modalities of discourse, praise and blame. There is no generic system without a hierarchy of genres. Determined by the subject represented, the genre defines the specific mode of its representation. The generic principle thus implies a third principle, which we will call the principle of decorum [*convenance*]. The poet who has chosen to represent gods rather than bourgeois, kings rather than shepherds, and has chosen a corresponding genre of fiction, must give his characters actions and discourses appropriate to their nature—and thus also appropriate to the poem's genre. The principle of decorum is thus in complete harmony with the principle of submission of *elocutio* to the invented fiction. “The tone, or key of the discourse is determined by the particular state and situation the person is in at the time he is speaking.”<sup>4</sup> It was upon this principle, much more than on the too-famous “three unities” or *catharsis*, that the French classical age constructed its poetics and founded its criteria. The problem is not one of obeying rules but of discerning modes of suitability. The goal of fiction is to please. On this point, Voltaire agrees with Corneille, who agrees with Aristotle. But because it must please well-bred people [*honnêtes gens*], fiction must respect what makes fiction respectable as well as pleasing the principle of decorum. Voltaire's *Commentaires sur Corneille* meticulously applies this principle to all characters and situations, to all their actions and discourses. What is wrong is always unsuitable. The subject of *Théodore*, for example, is vicious because there is “nothing tragic in this plot; a young man refuses the bride offered to him because he loves

another, who in turn does not want him—this is in fact a purely trivial subject for comedy.” The generals and princesses of *Suréna* “talk about love as if they were Parisian burghers.” In *Pulchérie*, the verses in which Martian swears his love “seem to come from an old shepherd rather than an old warrior.” Pulché-rie herself speaks “like a serving-girl in a comedy” or even like a writer. “What princess would ever begin by saying that love languishes amongst signs of favor and expires amidst pleasure?” Moreover, “it is not fitting for a princess to say she is in love.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a princess is not a shepherdess. But we should not mistake the nature of this unseemliness. Voltaire knows high society well enough to know that a princess, whether in love or not, speaks in pretty much the same way as a bourgeoisie, if not a shepherdess. What he means is that a princess in a tragedy should not declare her love in that way, that is, should not speak like a shepherdess in an eclogue, unless you want to turn tragedy into comedy. Even Batteux, when he recommends having gods speak “in the manner they really and naturally do,” is perfectly aware that our knowledge in this matter is fairly limited. The problem is to have them speak “not only as they commonly speak, but as they should speak, supposing each in his highest degree of perfection.”<sup>6</sup> It is not a matter of local color or faithful reproduction but of fictional verisimilitude. Verisimilitude involves the overlap of four criteria of decorum: first of all, conformity to the nature of human passions in general; next, conformity to the character or manners of a particular people or historical figure, as we know them through the best authors; third, agreement with the decency and taste that are appropriate to our own manners; and finally, conformity of actions and speech with the logic of actions and characters proper to a particular genre. The perfection of the representative system is not that of a grammarian’s rules. It is that of the genius who unites these four forms of decorum—natural, historical, moral, and conventional—and orders them in terms of the form that should dominate in a particular case. This is why, for example, it is Racine and not his doctrinaire critics who is correct when he shows us, in *Britannicus*, an emperor (Nero) hiding in order to overhear a conversation between lovers. The critics say that such an action is not fitting for an emperor and a tragedy; the situation and the character portrayed are comic. But this is because they have not read Tacitus, and therefore do not feel that this sort of situation is a faithful portrayal of Nero’s court, such as we know it through Tacitus.

Indeed, decorum is something that is felt, and its proof lies in sensation of pleasure. This is why La Harpe can absolve Chimène of the accusation of acting like an “unnatural daughter” when she listens to her father’s murderer speak to her of love. For even if the proof is negative, the theater verifies what is natural and what is unnatural:

I must once again ask the Academy's forgiveness, but I consider it to be conclusively proven that an unnatural daughter would not be accepted in the theater, much less produce the effect that Chimène produces. Mistakes like that are never forgiven since they are judged by the heart, and the people assembled cannot accept an impression that is contrary to nature.<sup>7</sup>

The Rousseauist accent of La Harpe's formulation here allows us to date the argument to the period of his revolutionary enthusiasm. But the only change this makes is to grant to the republican people a privilege of verification that La Harpe's master, Voltaire, reserved for informed connoisseurs. The principle of decorum defines a relation between the author and his subject whose success can only be judged by the spectator—a certain kind of spectator. Suitability is felt. The *littérateurs* of the Academy or the periodical press do not feel it—Corneille and Racine do. They feel it not on account of their knowledge of the rules of art, but on account of their kinship with their characters, or more precisely with what their characters ought to be. This kinship consists in the fact that, unlike the *littérateurs*, both the great authors and their characters are men of glory, men of beautiful and active speech. This further implies that their natural spectators are not men who watch but men who act and who act through speech. According to Voltaire, Corneille's primary spectators were Condé and Retz, Molé and Lamoignon; they were generals, preachers, and magistrates who came for instruction in speaking worthily and not today's audience of spectators composed merely of "a certain number of young men and young women."<sup>8</sup>

The principle of decorum thus rests upon a harmony between three persons: the author, the represented character, and the spectator present in the theater. The natural audience of the playwright, as that of the orator, is those who "come for instruction in speaking," since speaking is their true business, whether it to command or convince, to exhort or deliberate, to teach or to please. In this sense, La Harpe's "people assembled" is every bit as much opposed to the simple gathering of "a certain number of young men and young women" as are Voltaire's generals, magistrates, princes, and bishops. It is as agents of speech that they are qualified to make the pleasure they feel into a proof of the suitability of Chimène's behavior and Corneille's play. The edifice of representation is "a kind of republic, in which everyone ought to hold the rank proportioned to his condition."<sup>9</sup> It is thus a hierarchical edifice in which language must be subordinated to the fiction, the genre to the subject, and the style to the characters and situations represented. In this republic, the invention of the subject commands the disposition of parts and the suitability of expressions, in imitation of the order of the parts of the soul or the Platonic city.

But this hierarchy can only impose its law within the egalitarian relation between author, character, and spectator. This relationship itself depends upon a fourth and final principle that I will call the principle of presence [*actualité*] and that can be defined as follows: what gives the edifice of representation its norm is the primacy of the speech-act, of the performance of speech. The ideal scene described (or rather invented) by Voltaire provides an exemplary verification of this primacy: the orators of bar and pulpit, the princes and generals who learn the art of speaking from *Le Cid* are also men of active speech whose judgment provides Corneille with a verification of the accord between his own power to represent speech in action and that attached to the status of his characters.

The system of representation depends upon the equivalence between the act of representation and the affirmation of speech as action. This fourth principle does not contradict the first, which had affirmed that what makes a poem a poem is its fiction and not a particular modality of language. The final principle identifies the fictional representation of actions with a staging of the act of speech. There is no contradiction here, but rather a sort of double economy of the system: the autonomy of the fiction, whose only concern is to represent and please, depends upon another order, another scene of speech that provides it with a norm. In this “real” scene, it is not only a matter of pleasing by means of stories and discourses, but of educating minds, saving souls, defending the innocent, giving counsel to kings, exhorting the people, haranguing soldiers, or simply excelling in the sort of conversation that distinguishes men of wit. The system of poetic fiction is placed in the dependence of an ideal of efficacious speech, which in turn refers back to an art that is more than an art, that is, a manner of living, a manner of dealing with human and divine affairs: rhetoric. The values that define the power of poetic speech are those of the scene of oratory. This is the supreme scene in imitation and in view of which poetry displays its own perfections. What Voltaire said about Richelieu’s France is validated today by the historian of classical rhetoric:

Our concept of “literature” is too exclusively tied to the printed text and leaves out everything that was encompassed by the comprehensive ideal of the orator and his eloquence: the art of the harangue, the art of conversation, not to mention the *tacita significatio* of gestural and plastic arts [...]; it is no accident that the decade of the 1630s saw such a flourishing of the theater at the French court: it is the mirror of an art of living in society in which the art of speaking is at the heart of a general rhetoric whose principal reflectors are the art of writing and the art of painting.<sup>10</sup>

But this dependence of poetry upon an art of speech that is also an art of living in society is not proper to the hierarchy of a monarchical order; its equivalent can be found in the age of revolutionary assemblies. Once again, the chameleon La Harpe provides an explanation:

We next move from poetry to eloquence: more serious and important objects, more demanding and reflective study will replace the games of imagination and the diverse illusions of the most seductive of the arts [...]. In leaving one for the other, we should think of ourselves as passing from the pleasures of youth to the labors of maturity: for poetry is used for pleasure and eloquence for business [...]; when the minister announces the great truths of morality from his pulpit [...]; when the defender of innocence makes his voice heard in the courtroom; when the statesman deliberates in counsel on the fate of nations; when the citizen pleads the cause of freedom in the legislative assembly [...], then eloquence is not only an art but a sacred trust, consecrated by the veneration of all citizens [...]."

The essential place of the most elevated of the styles recognized by the tradition, the sublime style, is to be found in this oratorical speech. Our own age, in rereading pseudo-Longinus and reinterpreting the concept of the sublime, gladly associates his metaphors of storms, lava, and crashing waves with a modern crisis of narrative and representation. But the system of representation, genres and decorum always knew Longinus and found its supreme guarantee in the "sublime." Even more than Homer or Plato, the hero of sublime speech that Longinus's text gave to almost two millennia is Demosthenes.

The primacy of fiction, the generic nature of representation, defined and ordered according to the subject represented, the suitability of the means of representation, and the ideal of speech in action: these four principles define the "republican" order of the system of representation. This republic is a Platonic one in which the intellectual part of art (the invention of the subject) commands its material part (the suitability of words and images), and it can equally well espouse the hierarchical order of the monarchy or the egalitarian order of republican orators. Whence stems the constant complicity, in the nineteenth century, between academic old wigs and radical republicans to protect this system against innovative *littérateurs*, an alliance symbolized, in opposition to Hugo as well as in Mallarmé's perception, by the name of Ponsard, the entirely republican author of old-style tragedies. It is also their common perception that is summarized by Gustave Planche's reaction to the monstrous poem *Notre-Dame de Paris*, this prose poem dedicated to stone that can only humanize its

object at the cost of petrifying human speech. This monstrous invention emblematises the collapse of the system in which the poem was a well-constructed fable presenting men who act and explain their action in beautiful speeches suitable to their condition, the situation of the action, and the pleasure of men of taste. Planche's argument points to the heart of the scandal: the reversal of body and soul, tied to the disequilibrium between parts of the soul, the material power of words in the place of the intellectual power of ideas. An entire poetic cosmology has been overturned. Representative poetry was composed of stories submitted to principles of concatenation, characters submitted to principles of verisimilitude, and discourses submitted to principles of decorum. The new poetry—expressive poetry—is made of sentences and images, sentence-images that have inherent value as manifestations of poeticity, that claim a relation immediately expressive of poetry, similar to the relation *Notre-Dame de Paris* poses between the image sculpted on a column, the architectural unity of the cathedral, and the unifying principle of divine and collective faith.

This change in cosmology can be expressed as a strict and term-for-term reversal of the four principles that structured the representative system. In opposition to the primacy of fiction, we find the primacy of language. In opposition to its distribution into genres, the antigenetic principle of the equality of all represented subjects. In opposition to the principle of decorum, the indifference of style with respect to the subject represented. In opposition to the ideal of speech in action, the model of writing. These four principles define the new poetics. What remains to be seen is whether the systematic reversal of four coherent principles defines a symmetrical coherence. Anticipating on our analysis, we can say that the problem is whether, and in what way, the affirmation of poetry as a mode of language and the principle of indifference are compatible with one other. The history of “literature” will be the constantly renewed testing of this problematic compatibility. What this means is that, if the idea of literature could be declared sacred by some and empty by others, it is because it is, *stricto sensu*, the name of a contradictory poetics.

Let us set out from the heart of the problem, namely the ruin of the generic principle. This affirmation, in truth, is subject to debate: One of the great ambitions of the Schlegel brothers was the reconstitution of a system of genres from its obsolescence. More than one literary theorist of today contends that we too have our genres, merely different ones from those of the classical age.<sup>12</sup> We no longer write tragedies, epics or pastorals, but we have novels and novellas, short stories and essays. But it is clear what makes these distinctions problematic and renders the Schlegel brothers' project vain: A genre is only a genre if it is determined by its subject. The genre under which *Notre-Dame de Paris* presents itself

is that of the novel. But the novel is a false genre, a non-generic genre that has never stopped traveling, ever since its birth in antiquity, from sacred temples and royal courts to the houses of merchants, to dives and brothels, or lending itself, in its modern form, to the adventures and loves of lords as well as the tribulations of schoolboys and courtesans, actors and bourgeois. The novel is the genre of what has no genre: not even a low genrelike comedy, with which some have assimilated it. Comedy matches vulgar subjects with the sorts of situations and forms of expression appropriate to them, whereas the novel it has no principle of decorum. This also means that it is lacking in any determinate fictional nature. As we have seen, this is the foundation of Don Quixote's "madness," that is, his rupture with the requisites of a scene proper to fiction. When Flaubert affirms that "there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects" and even "that there is no such thing as a subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things," he raises the anarchy of this nongenre to the rank of an "axiom" expressing "the standpoint of pure Art."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, if "Yvetot is the equal of Constantinople," and if the adulterous loves of a daughter of Norman peasants are as interesting as the loves of a Carthaginian princess and proper to the same form, it follows that no specific mode of expression is more suitable to one than to the other. Style is no longer what it was up to that point: the choice of modes of expression appropriate to the different characters in a given situation and of ornaments proper to the genre. Style now becomes the very principle of art.

But we still need to figure out what that means. A lazy orthodoxy sees it as merely the affirmation of the individual virtuosity of the writer who transforms base matter into literary gold—gold all the purer as the matter is base—and, positing his aristocracy in the place of the hierarchies of representation, ends up sublimating it in a new priesthood of art. But we cannot dispose so easily of the wall, the desert, and the sacred. The identification of "style" with the inmost power of the work is not the viewpoint of an aesthete, but the culmination of a complex process of transformation of poetic form and matter. It presupposes a plurisecular history of encounters between the poem, the stone, the people, and the Book (even if it effaces its traces). In the course of this long history the idea whose refusal determined the entire poetics of representation eventually imposed itself: the poem is a mode of language; its essence is the essence of language. But this history also brought forth the internal contradiction of the new poetic system, the contradiction with which literature is the interminable coming-to-terms.

# CHAPTER 2

## FROM THE BOOK OF STONE TO THE BOOK OF LIFE

**B**EFORE THE wall and the sacred desert, there was the cathedral. Before Flaubert’s “book about nothing”—and in order for this book to be thinkable—there was Hugo’s monstrous “book of stone.” Planche’s text, of course, is “metaphorical.” Hugo’s novel is about a cathedral, but the matter in which he writes is words, not stone. The metaphor, however, is not merely a figurative way of saying that Hugo’s book subordinates action to description, discourse to images, and syntax to words. It ratifies, in a polemical form, a new principle of translatability among the arts. It reminds us that poetry is two things: both a particular art and the principle of coherence of the system of the arts, of the convertibility of their forms.

The poetics of representation unified the system of beaux arts according to a dual principle. The first, expressed by the dictum *ut pictura poesis*, was that of mimetic identity. Painting and poetry were convertible into one another in that both were stories. It was on this same basis that music and dance had to be appreciated if they were to deserve the name of arts. No doubt the principle developed by Batteux quickly found its limits. Diderot, albeit without great success, had explored the limits of translation between the pictorial scene and the theatrical stage. Burke had shown that the

power of Milton's "images" consisted paradoxically in the fact that they showed nothing. Lessing's *Laocoön* proclaimed the collapse of the principle: The stone face that the sculptor gave to Virgil's hero could only translate Virgil's poetry by turning the awesome into the grotesque. But the general principle of translatability between the arts is not thereby ruined; it needs to be displaced from the problematic concordance of forms of imitation toward the equivalence of modes of expression.

The second unifying principle was the model of organic coherence. Whatever its matter and form of imitation, the work was a "beau vivant," a totality of parts adjusted to one another to contribute to a single end. Such coherence identified the dynamism of life with the rigor of architectural proportion. Burke had harshly criticized this unifying ideal of beautiful proportion and organic unity. But as there is no poetics without an idea of the translatability of the arts, the new poetics will necessarily rethink this translatability. Poetics will cease imposing the model of representative fiction on the other arts, and will now borrow from them a substitutive principle of poeticity, a principle capable of freeing literary specificity from the representative model. Mallarmé and Proust will provide exemplary illustrations of this singular procedure by which poetry seeks to take from music, painting, or dance a formula capable of being "repatriated" into literature, and thus of giving a new foundation to poetic privilege, even as it gives such a principle to the other arts: Elstir's pictorial "metaphors" or the "conversation" of Vinteuil's sonata. The principle underlying these complex interchanges is, in any case, clear: Henceforth, the correspondence between the arts will no longer be conceived as an equivalence between ways of telling a story but as an analogy between forms of language. If Gustave Planche can turn Hugo's metaphor of speaking stone against him, it is because it is more than a metaphor, or rather because metaphor itself is henceforth more than a "figure" whose function is to give a fitting ornament to the discourse. Metaphor, as an analogy between languages, is now the very principle of poeticity.

The novel of Hugo the innovator and the discourse of his retrograde critic are both possible on the basis of a supposition that the analogy between the monument of the book and the poem of stone is an analogy between two works of language. The cathedral here is a scriptural model, not an architectural one. This means two things. If the work is a cathedral, it is because, in a first sense, it is the monument of an art that is not governed by the mimetic principle. Like the cathedral, the new novel does not allow itself to be compared to anything outside itself; it does not relate to its subject in terms of a representative system of decorum. It builds, in the matter of words, a monument that must be appreciated purely in terms of the magnitude of its proportions and the profusion of its

figures. The translation of the architectural metaphor into a linguistic metaphor expresses the idea that the work is in the first place the effect of a singular power of creation. It is like a particular language carved in the material of common language. Another contributor to the *Revue des deux mondes* put it in these terms:

No one but M. Hugo could have written these pages, with their faults and beauties. Here we encounter a thought that seems so powerful that the sentence containing it is about to explode. Elsewhere we find an image so picturesque that no painter could render it as the poet conceived it. Sometimes the language seems so strange that we think the author must have used the unknown letters of a primitive idiom and that no other author is capable of having produced the very combination of the letters of the alphabet.<sup>1</sup>

The cathedral of words is a unique work, stemming from the power of a genius that goes far beyond the traditional task of genius as Batteux had analyzed it, that of seeing clearly the object to be represented. It is already a “book about nothing,” the signature of an individual as such.<sup>2</sup> But this incomparable book, which expresses only the genius’s individual power, becomes like the cathedral of stone, which also expresses only the anonymous power of its creators, the genius of a common soul. The creator’s absolute genius recognizes its likeness with the anonymous genius that built the collective poem, the collective prayer of the cathedral. The poet can make, in a cathedral of words, the novel of the cathedral of stone because the latter is in itself already a book. This is what Hugo discovered one night while traveling when he saw the tympanum of Cologne cathedral:

A light shining in a nearby window briefly illuminated a crowd of exquisite statuettes seated under the vaults. Angels and saints were reading from a great book resting on their knees, while others spoke and preached with one finger raised. Some studied, others taught. An admirable prologue for a church that is nothing but the Word made marble, bronze, and stone.<sup>3</sup>

The original power of the poem is borrowed from the common power whence all poems originate. The cathedral is a poem of stone. It is the identity of an architect’s work and a people’s faith; it materializes the content of that faith, that is, the power of incarnation of the Word. In opposition to the unifying principle of narrative, as expressed by *ut pictura poesis*, we now see the unifying principle of the Word as the language of all languages, the language that gathers together at the origin each particular language’s power of incarnation. The

value of the poet's singular idiom lies in its expression of the common power of the Word made visible by the cathedral, the divine power of speech become the collective spirit of a people. This speech would forget itself in stone and be lost to the insouciance of builders and wreckers if poetic speech did not once again make manifest in a poem of words the poetico-religious power inscribed in it. A circle—mimicking the one that once linked the dramatic poet and the universe of speech in action—brings together the readers and the preachers of the book of Life represented on the stone tympanum, the cathedral as Book or Word incarnate in stone, the faith of the builders of cathedrals, and the enterprise of bringing to life in a novel charnel figures analogous to the sculpted figures and stone-words of the cathedral-book. But this circle is no longer that of the orator's speech act: Is the circle of writing. In opposition to the sacred orator we find the stone saint or angel who can better proclaim the power of the Word made flesh. In opposition to the profane orator exhorting the assembled people we find the builder of the stone poem who can better express the power of the community inhabited by speech. Eloquent speech is henceforth the silent speech of what does not speak in the language of words or what makes words speak otherwise than as instruments of a discourse of persuasion or seduction: as symbols of the power of the Word, the power by which the Word becomes flesh. The circle of speech binding the poet's book to the book of the tympanum, and the book of the tympanum to the book of Life that inspired the builder, can seem quite close to the one that was drawn around the dramatic scene. There has nonetheless occurred a substitution in the paradigm of living speech, so that writing has become living speech. This new paradigm now governs poetry, making it no longer a genre of belles lettres, defined by the principle of fiction, but a use of language, one that is most exemplarily demonstrated in the prose of the anti-genre that is the novel. Hugo's prose derives its poetic character not from its reproduction of the sculpted scene on the tympanum of the cathedral, but from what that scene expresses, that is, what it both manifests and symbolizes—what it says twice in its muteness—the difference by which stone becomes Word and Word stone.

But, in order to understand and draw all the consequences of the formula that makes poem and stone equivalent, we must unfold the various relations it envelops: between the novel and the book of Life; between the book of Life and the poem; between the poem, the people, and stone. Let us begin with the beginning, that is, with the apparent paradox that binds together the novelistic anti-genre and the sacred text in the name of poetry. In 1669, Pierre-Daniel Huet published his treatise *De l'origine des romans*. Huet is the very exemplar of Voltaire's *littérateurs*, more passionate about the Latin verses he exchanges with his friend Ménage than about the new productions of the tragic stage. It is

all the more meaningful to see him, like Ménage, take an interest in the ruleless literature of the novel and to collaborate discreetly with Mme. de Lafayette, writing this preface for her *Princesse de Montpensier* that is as long as the novel itself. The link he forges between the disdained genre of the novel, poetic tradition, and the sacred Book whose priest he was soon to become is even more significant.

At first sight, Huet's point seems to come down to an enlargement of the poetic domain to allow it to include the marginal genre of the novel. He establishes this point on the basis of a "maxim of Aristotle's," which is nowhere to be found in the text of the *Poetics* but is certainly in agreement with its doctrine: "The poet is a poet on account of the fictions he invents rather than the verses he composes." The concept of *mimesis* is discretely replaced with the broader concept of "fabulation." But this substitution is what allows the apparent broadening of the mimetic domain to subvert its own principle. For "fabulation" means two things at once. On the one hand, it is the confused and imagistic perception by the peoples of the barbarian West of a truth that they are incapable of discerning. But it is also the set of artifices—fables, images, plays of sonority—that the peoples of the refined East have invented for the transmission of truth, which hide the part that must be hidden and decorate the part that must be transmitted. The domain of fabulation is therefore that of the sensible presentation of a nonsensible truth. This mode of presentation is both the art by which wise men enveloped the principles of theology and science in fables or hid them in hieroglyphs, and the naturally "poetic and richly inventive" turn of mind of peoples who reason figuratively and explain themselves allegorically. Homer and Herodotus taught the Greeks this manner. Pythagoras and Plato used it to disguise their philosophy, which Aesop translated into popular fables and the Arabs took from Aesop and passed into the Qur'an. But it is also the manner of the Persians, in love with the "art of lying beautifully" to which the buskers in the Isfahan marketplace still bear witness. It is found in Chinese apologetics and Indian philosophical parables. This Oriental manner, finally, is that of Holy Scripture itself, "entirely mystical, entirely allegorical, entirely enigmatic." The Psalms, Proverbs, and the books of Ecclesiastes and Job are "poetic works full of figures that would appear too bold and violent in our writings but that are common in those of this nation"; the Song of Songs is "a drama in pastoral form in which the passionate feelings of the bride and the bridegroom are expressed in a manner so tender and touching that we would be enchanted by them if these figures were only more in accord with our own genius."<sup>4</sup>

It had long been recognized—at least since Saint Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*, and Erasmus had forcefully recalled the fact—that the tropes used

in the sacred text were formally comparable to those of profane poetry. But an immense distance separates that recognition from Huet's thesis. With no particular difficulty, this churchman, courtier, and man of letters has reduced Scripture as a whole not only to the tropes of the poets but to the fabulating genius of peoples. Holy Scripture is a poem, a poem that expresses not only the human genius of fabulation in general but also the particular genius of a people far from us. The notion of fabulation comprises the images of the prophets, the riddles of Solomon, the parables of Jesus, the refined consonances of the Psalms or Saint Augustine, the oriental turns of Saint Jerome, the exegeses of the Talmudists, and the figural explanations of Saint Paul. Fable, metaphor, rhyme, and exegesis are all modes of this power of fabulation, that is, the presentation of the truth in images. They all compose a single language of images in which the categories of *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* collapse, and with them the "literature" of the erudite. The novel communicates with Holy Scripture in the name of a theory of poetry that turns it into a tropology, a figurative language of truth.

The notion of fabulation thus implies a coexistence of opposites: the old dramatic conception of poetry and a new conception that gives it an essentially tropological nature. It was Vico who, in his *New Science* of 1725, broke the compromise and proclaimed the overturning of "all the previous theories about the origins of poetry" from Aristotle to Scaliger. Huet's "Aristotelian" formula grounded the poet's identity in his use of fictions and not his employment of a determinate mode of language. But the notion of fabulation that he used undermined this opposition insofar as it identified fiction and figure. Vico formulates the reversal in its full generality: Fiction is a figure, a way of speaking. But for him, the figure itself is no longer an invention of art, a technique of language that serves the ends of rhetorical persuasion or poetic pleasure; the figure is a mode of language that corresponds to a certain state of its development. This stage of language is also a stage of thought. The figurative mode of language expresses a spontaneous perception of things that does not yet distinguish between proper and figurative, concepts and images, things and our feelings. Poetry does not invent; it is not the *tekhnè* of a personage, the artist, who constructs verisimilar fictions for the pleasure of another personage, the spectator, who is equally skilled in the art of speech. Poetry is a language that speaks of things "as they are" for someone awakening to language and thought. It speaks of things as he sees them and speaks of them, as he cannot help but see them and speak of them. It is the necessary union between speech and thought, between knowledge and ignorance. The cascade of synonyms that opens the chapter on Poetic Logic summarizes this revolution in the idea of poetycity:

The word logic comes from Greek *logos*, which at first properly meant fable, or *fabula* in Latin, which later changed into Italian *favella*, speech. In Greek, a fable was also called *mythos*, myth, from which is derived Latin *mutus*, mute. For speech was born in the mute age as a mental language [...]; this is why in Greek *logos* means both word and idea.<sup>5</sup>

Let us follow the order of implications. Fiction—or figure, it amounts to the same thing—is the way in which still-speechless man conceives of the world, in his own resemblance: He sees the sky and designates a Jupiter who speaks, as he does, a language of gesture, who says his will and enacts it at the same time through the signs of thunder and lightning. The original figures of the arts of poetry and rhetoric are the gestures by which man designates things. They are the fictions that he creates for himself: they are false if considered as representations of the being of things, but true insofar as they express his position amongst them. Rhetoric is mythology; mythology is anthropology. Fictive beings are the imaginative universals that hold the place of the general ideas man does not yet have the ability to form by abstraction. The fable is the common birth of speech and thought. It is the first stage of thought, formulated in a language that mixes together gesture and sound in a speech that is still equivalent to muteness. These imaginative universals, to which the power of fiction can be reduced, can be rigorously assimilated to the language of the deaf and dumb. The deaf and dumb speak with gestures that draw resemblances of what they mean or with confused sounds that strive vainly towards articulate language. From the first language stem the images, similitudes, and comparisons of poetry, the tropes that are not the inventions of writers but “necessary modes of expression of all the early poetic nations.” From the second derive song and verse, which precede prose: Men “formed their first languages by singing.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus poetry’s original power is equivalent to the first impotence of a thought incapable of abstraction and an inarticulate language. Poetry invents the gods in whose figure man makes manifest—that is, both knows and ignores—his power of thought and speech. But this “knowledge” of false gods that forms the matter of the first poetry and wisdom of peoples is of course also the way that the providence of the true God allows them to become conscious of themselves. This knowledge is not abstract; it is the historical consciousness of a people as translated by its institutions and its monuments. The “poets” are also theologians and founders of nations. The “hieroglyphs” that divine providence uses to signal itself to men and give them self-knowledge are not the enigmatic signs and depositories of hidden wisdom upon which so many interpretations and reveries have been built. They are the altar of worship and the augur’s wand; the

flame of the hearth and the funerary urn; the farmer's plow, the scribe's tablet, and the ship's tiller; the warrior's sword and the scales of justice. They are the instruments and emblems, the institutions and monuments of common life.

Poetry, as we know, was not Vico's real concern. If he wanted to find "the true Homer," it was not in order to found a poetics but to put an end to a quarrel as old as Christianity and refute once and for all the paganistic argument that saw Homer's fables and Egyptian hieroglyphs as dissimulating an ancient and admirable wisdom. Vico responds to this theory that sees poetry's language as a sort of false bottom with a radical thesis: poetry is only the language of childhood, the language of a humanity in transition from original silence to articulate speech by way of the image-gesture and the deafness of song. But this apparent refutation of the duplicity of poetic language in fact radicalizes it. The "mute" speech of poetry is also the form in which a truth is revealed to mortals and humanity becomes conscious of itself. Vico's refutation of the allegorical character of poetry assures its status as symbolic language, as a language that speaks less by what it says than by what it does not say, by the power that is expressed through it. Thus the poem's success can be identified with the deficiency of speech, but this also means it can be identified with the sensible manifestation of a truth or even with the self-presentation of a community through its works. This consciousness inscribed in the language of poetic words is likewise found in the tools of agriculture, the institutions of law, and the emblems of justice. Poetry is thus one particular manifestation of the poeticity of the world, that is, of the way in which a truth is given to a collective consciousness in the form of works and institutions. But it is also a privileged organon for understanding of this truth. It is a fragment of the poem of the world and a hermeneutics of its poeticity, of the way in which this truth anticipates itself through mute-speaking works, works that speak as images, as stones, as matter that resists the signification whose vehicle it is.

The quest for the "true Homer" indeed leads to a revolution in the whole system of belles lettres. A century later, Quinet drew up the balance sheet when he said that the solution given to the question of Homer's historicity changed "the very basis of art." By making Homer "the voice of ancient Greece, an echo of divine speech, the voice of the crowd, belonging to no one,"<sup>7</sup> Vico changed the status of poetry. Poetry is no longer the activity that produces poems; it is the quality of poetic objects. Poetry is defined by poeticity: a state of language, a specific way that thought and language belong to one another, a relation between what the one knows and does not know and what the other says and does not say. Poetry is the manifestation of a poeticity that belongs to the first essence of language—"poem of the entire human race," August Wilhelm Schlegel will say.<sup>8</sup>

But the equivalence must be thought in both directions. Any object capable of being perceived in terms of the self-difference that defines poetic language—that is, language in its original state—will be defined as a poetic object. Poeticity is the property by which any object can be doubled, taken not only as a set of properties but as the manifestation of an essence, not only as the effect of certain causes but as the metaphor or metonymy of the power that produced it. This passage from a regime of causal concatenation to a regime of expressivity can be summed up in an apparently anodyne sentence of Novalis's: “A child is a love made visible.” What this means, in its full generality, is that any effect is a sign that makes visible the hidden power of its cause. The passage from a causal poetics of narrative to an expressive poetics of language is completely contained within this displacement. Any configuration of sensible properties can be assimilated to an arrangement of signs and thus to a manifestation of language in its primary poetical state. Such a doubling can be carried out for any object.

For each thing first presents itself, that is, reveals its interior by its exterior, its essence by its appearance (it is thus a symbol for itself); next it presents what is in the closest relation to it and acts upon it; finally, it is a mirror of the universe.<sup>9</sup>

Any stone can also be language. Hugo speaks of a sculpted angel that unites the craftsman's mark with the power of the evoked Verb and collective faith, but the same is true of Jouffroy's pebble: no doubt it tells us relatively little since it lacks remarkable properties, but its color and form are already written signs, hardly legible as yet but destined to become more so if only it be sculpted or spoken in the crystal of words.<sup>10</sup> This power of language, immanent in every object, can be interpreted in a mystical way, as it is by the young German poets or philosophers who endlessly repeat Kant's characterization of nature as a poem written in a “ciphered language” and, like Novalis, assimilate the study of materials to the old “theory of signatures.”<sup>11</sup> But it can also be rationalized and seen as the testimony that mute things bear to mankind's activity. In the transition from Michelet's “lyricism” to the sober science of *Annales*-school historians, a new idea of historical science will appear on this basis, founded on the deciphering of “mute witnesses.” The common principle of these various interpretations is the following: not only does poeticity no longer stem from any principle of generic suitability, but it also no longer defines any particular form or matter. It is the language of both stones and words, of novelistic prose and epics, of manners and works. Henceforth, the poet is the one who speaks the poeticity

of things. He can be the Homeric poet as described by Hegel who expresses the poeticity of a collective way of life. He can also be the Proustian novelist who deciphers the hieroglyphs of the book printed within him, draws a world out of the sound of a fork, and links the alliterations of things in the rings of style.<sup>12</sup> Poetic genius is henceforth defined as the expression of language's distance from itself and of the doubling by which anything can become language, as the union of consciousness and the unconscious or the individual and the anonymous. We must begin from this point if we are to think the notions and oppositions that will structure the literary domain.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE BOOK OF LIFE AND THE EXPRESSION OF SOCIETY

**A** GOOD STARTING point is the primacy of *elocutio*, which will give rise to the theory of the absolute character of style and to the notions currently employed to indicate the specificity of modern literary language, namely the “intransitive” or “self-referential” character of language. Partisans of literary exceptionality and denouncers of its utopianism both tend to refer to German Romanticism and in particular to a formula of Novalis’s: “It is amazing, the absurd error that people make of imagining they are speaking for the sake of things; no one knows the essential thing about language, that it is concerned only with itself.”<sup>1</sup> But it is important to see that this “self-referentiality” of language is in no way a formalism. If language has no reason to be concerned with anything but itself, it is not because it is a self-sufficient game but because it already contains within itself an experience of the world and a text of knowledge, because it speaks this experience itself, before us. “It is the same with language as it is with mathematical formulae—they constitute a world in itself—their play is self-sufficient, they express nothing but their own marvelous nature, and this is the very reason why they are so expressive, why they are the mirror to the strange play of relationships among things.”<sup>2</sup> The abstraction of mathematical signs leaves representative resemblance behind. But

in doing so it takes on the character of a language-mirror that expresses in its internal play the intimate play of relations between things. Language does not reflect things; it expresses their relations. But this expression is itself conceived as another resemblance. If the function of language is not to represent ideas, situations, objects, or characters according to the norms of resemblance, it is because it already presents, on its very body, the physiognomy of what it says. It does not resemble things as a copy because it bears their resemblance as a memory. It is not an instrument of communication because it is already the mirror of a community. Language is made of materialities that are materializations of its own spirit, the spirit that must become a world. And this future is itself attested by the way in which any physical reality is capable of being doubled, of displaying its nature, history, or destiny on its body.

Novalis's formula thus cannot be interpreted as an affirmation of the intransitivity of language in opposition to communicative transitivity. This opposition itself is, in fact, an ideological artifact. All communication, in fact, uses signs deriving from a variety of modes of signification: signs that say nothing, signs that efface themselves before their message, signs that have the value of gestures or of icons. Poetic "communication" in general is founded upon the systematic exploitation of differences between these regimes. The passage from a poetics of representation to a poetics of expression overturns the hierarchy of relations among them. In opposition to language considered as an instrument of demonstration and exemplification, addressed to a qualified auditor, it promotes a conception of language as a living body of symbols, that is, expressions that both show and hidewhat they sayon their body, expressions that do not so much show a particular determinate thing as the nature and history of language as a world- or community-creating power. Language is not sent back to its own solitude, for it has no solitude. There are two privileged axes for thinking about language: the horizontal axis of the message transmitted to a determinate auditor to whom an object is signified, and the vertical axis where language speaks above all by manifesting its own provenance and bringing forth the powers sedimented in its own depths. There is no contradiction between the "monological" formula of Novalis, the mystical representative of pure poetry, and the reasonable considerations of the economist Sismondi, who assigns the origin of poetry to the moment in a nation's life at which "no one writes for the sake of writing; no one speaks merely for the sake of speaking."<sup>3</sup> These apparently contradictory theses are joined together not only by Novalis's linkwith the Schlegel brothers and August Schlegel's link with the circle of Mme de Staël, to which Sismondi belongs. They belong to a single idea of the correspondence between language and what it says. Language is only self-sufficient because the laws of a world are reflected in it.

This world can itself take on a number of figures, variously mystical or rational in appearance. For Novalis, inspired by Swedenborg, it is the “sensuous inner world” that is the truth of the other world, that spiritual truth that the process of *Bildung* should one day make identical with empirical reality. But Balzac, another Swedenborgian, will draw an equivalence between this sensuous inner world and the anatomy of society. Henceforth, language speaks in the first place of its own provenance. But this provenance can be just as well ascribed to the laws of history and society as to those of the spiritual world. The essence of poetry is identical with the essence of language insofar as the latter is itself identical with the internal law of societies. Literature is “social”; it is the expression of a society even as it is only concerned with itself, that is, with the way in which words contain a world. It is “autonomous” insofar as it has no rules proper to it, as it is the space without contours of its own in which the manifestations of poeticity can be displayed. It is in this sense that Jouffroy will be able to say that literature “is not properly speaking an art but the translation of the arts.”<sup>4</sup> Formerly, the “poetic” translation of the arts had been the equivalence of different modes of the same act of representation. Henceforth, it is something entirely different: the translation of “languages.” Each art is a specific language, a particular manner of combining the expressive values of sound, sign, and form. But a particular poetics is also a specific version of the principle of translation between languages. The various “schools” into which the romantic century is commonly divided—“Romanticism,” “realism,” and “symbolism”—are, in fact, all determined by the same principle. They differ amongst themselves only in terms of the point from which they effectuate this translation. As poeticized by Zola, the cascade of fabrics in Octave Mouret’s shop window is indeed the poem of a poem, the poem of the double, “sensible-supersensible” being that Marx defines as the commodity. *The Ladies’ Paradise* is much more devoted to the poetry of this supersensible being than it is to the tribulations of the pale Denise. Interminable “realist” or “naturalist” descriptions are not derived from a principle of reportage or the informative use of language, nor from a strategically calculated “reality effect,” but rather from the poetics of the doubling of each thing in language.<sup>5</sup> *The Ladies’ Paradise* presents us with a “sensuous inner world” that is neither more nor less mystical than Baudelaire’s “double room,” Mallarmé’s “castle of purity,” or Hugo’s “shadowy voice.” The poetic doubling of each thing can be interpreted in either a mystical or a positivist manner. In the first case, what it shows us is the spirit world, in the second the character of a civilization or the domination of a class. But mysticism and positivism can go together perfectly well, like Cuvier and Swedenborg in the preface to the *Human Comedy*. Long before positivist scholarship, writers strongly marked by symbolist mysticism

such as Hugo and Balzac were concerned to trace the way in which man “has a tendency to express his culture [*mœurs*], his thoughts, and his life in everything that he appropriates to his use” and to expose the principles of the “the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners.”<sup>6</sup> Before them, it was historians of the origins of modern European civilizations such as Barante and Guizot who propagated the new understanding of literature by studying the relationship between its development and institutions and manners.

“Literature is an expression of society”: this formula, which spreads through France in the opening years of the nineteenth century, is generally attributed to Bonald. We can see clearly what connects it with the obsessive preoccupations of counter-revolutionary thought that, mediated by Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, will lead to Durkheimian scientific sociology: the critique of the formalism of theories of the social contract and the rights of man; the demand for an organic society in which laws, customs, and opinions reflect one another and express a single principle of organic cohesion. Against “*philosophie*” and the apriorism of natural law and the social contract, literature presents itself as the language of societies rooted in their histories and grasped in their profound organic life. As Chateaubriand notes, it was the émigrés of the Revolution who first spoke this language.<sup>7</sup> This does not, however, make it the expression of the counter-revolution; more profoundly, it is the language of the civilization whose secret progress is indifferent to the order of governments that attempt either to advance it or resist it. It is entirely natural that it should have been formulated first by those whom the revolutionary disturbances put on the outside of the movement of the age and the language of opinion, but also by those who sought to define a political order that would found liberty in the movement of societies themselves have it advance with the rhythm of changing civilization. Indeed, the new idea of literature was imposed not so much by the counter-revolutionaries as by the supporters of the third way, in-between Jacobin revolution and aristocratic counter-revolution: the partisans of reasonable liberty whose exemplary representative was Necker’s daughter, Germaine de Staël. They were no more concerned than Vico had been with the theoretical foundation of a new poetics. In the Preface to the second edition of *The Influence of Literature upon Society*, Staël makes clear that the guardians of the temple of belles lettres can rest easy:

My work has been misunderstood if it is believed that my purpose was to establish a poetics. I said on the very first page that Voltaire, Marmontel, and La Harpe leave nothing to be desired in this respect. What I wanted to show was the relation that exists between the literature and the social institutions of each century and each country [...] I also wanted to prove

that reason and philosophy have always gained renewed force despite the innumerable misfortunes of the human race. Next to these results, my taste in poetry is inconsequential [...] and anyone who has different opinions than I do concerning the pleasures of the imagination could still completely agree with me about the comparisons I have drawn between the political situation of peoples and their literature.<sup>8</sup>

There is a certain irony in this modesty. It was not for nothing that Balzac made his spiritual brother, the mystic Louis Lambert, Mme de Staël's godson. It is true that on many points her tastes do agree with those of La Harpe, and she certainly knows his work better than she does that of Vico. Her first concern, moreover, is not aesthetic but political. Her goals are to find the "spirit" of literature in the same way that Montesquieu analyzed the spirit of the laws, to refute those who see the Revolution as a catastrophe brought on by the writers of the Enlightenment, and to show, through the testimony of literature, the contrary but necessary historical evolution that determined the Revolution as well as the role of "*littérateurs*" in a well-constituted republic. Still, under cover of talking about something other than poetics and of dealing with the extrinsic relation between works, institutions, and manners rather than with the value or proper creation of works, she ruins what was the very heart of the representative system, namely its normative character. For representative poetics, it was impossible to dissociate the reasons for the fabrication of the poem from judgments concerning its value. Poetical science stated what poems ought be in order to please those whose vocation was to judge them. The place defined by this relation between knowledge of fabrication and the norm of taste will henceforth be occupied by the analogy between spirit, language, and society. There is now no reason to worry about what the poem ought to be in order to satisfy its authorized judges. The poem is what it ought to be as the language of the spirit of a time, a people, and a civilization. Mme de Staël's lack of concern with its symbolic foundations validates a neutralized or "white" version of expressive poetics, one which reduces the key oppositions at stake to their common denominator: the poetics of the unconscious genius of peoples and that of the creative artist, the intransitivity of literature and its function as a mirror, the expression of a hidden spiritual world and that of the social relations of production. She thus gives a foundation to the simultaneous possibility of what seem to be contrary procedures: that of the mystics and iconoclasts of the Romantic revolution and that of reasonable minds such as Guizot, Barante, and Villemain, for whom the study of literature as an "expression of society" goes hand-in-hand with the quest for a new political order that will ratify the historical results of the

revolution and stabilize post-revolutionary society, an order in which the forms of a government will be “the expression of the manners, the belief, the confidence of a people,” in which laws communicate with manners through “a sort of stamp for the current habits, opinions, and affections that may be received on trust throughout the country”<sup>9</sup>; an order of government capable, like Shakespearean theater, of simultaneously satisfying “the wants of the masses and the requirements of the most exalted minds,”<sup>10</sup> in which laws draw their force from manners and harmonize with them through the mediation of a regime of opinion. Barante became a peer of France during the Restoration; Guizot and Villemain were ministers of the “juste milieu” under Louis-Philippe. Together they welcomed the iconoclast Hugo to the Académie Française. Literary radicality and the banalization of the term literature go together, like the absolutization of art and the development of the historical, political, and sociological sciences.

The principle of this solidarity is simple. There are only two kinds of poetics: a representative poetics that determines the genre and generic perfection of poems on the basis of their invention of a fable; and an expressive poetics that determines them as direct expressions of the poetic power. A normative poetics says how poems should be made; a historical poetics says how they are made, that is, in the end, how they express the state of things, language, and manners that gave them birth. This fundamental division puts on the same side the adepts of pure literature and the historians and sociologists who see it as the expression of a society, those who dream of a spirit world along with the geologists of social mentalities. It subsumes the practice of pure artists and social critics under a single spiritual principle whose ineradicable vitality consists in its remarkable capacity to transform itself into a principle of positive science and materialist philosophy. This principle can be summarized in two fundamental rules: first, to find beneath words the vital force that is the cause of their utterance; second, to find in the visible the sign of the invisible.

On turning over the large stiff pages of a folio volume, or the yellow leaves of a manuscript, in short, a poem, a code of laws, a profession of faith, what is your first comment? You say to yourself that the work before you is not of its own creation. It is simply a mold like a fossil, an imprint similar to one of those forms embedded in a stone by an animal that once lived and perished. Beneath the shell was an animal and behind the document there was a man [ . . . ]. On observing the visible man with your own eyes what do you try to find in him? The invisible man. These words which your ears catch, those gestures, those airs of the head, his attire and sensible operations of all kinds, are, for you, merely so many expressions; these express

something, a soul. An inward man is hidden beneath the outward man, and the latter simply manifests the former.

The author who thus places himself beneath the mystical sign of Saint-Martin’s “invisible man,” of the spirit of the letter and the sensuous inner world, is none other than the great iconoclast who established the hateful “reduction” of literary works to the conditions of race, milieu and moment: Hypolite Taine.<sup>11</sup> No doubt the young Stéphane Mallarmé thought that Taine’s theory, which makes literature the expression of a specific race and milieu, is “humiliating for the artist,” but even as he reproaches Taine for not understanding “the beauty of verse,” he credits him with feeling “the soul of poetry marvelously.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Proust may claim, against Sainte-Beuve, that the power of the work is autonomous with respect to the conditions of its birth, as he will reject the patriotic and popular art that many of his contemporaries called for. But this is only because they did not go far enough along the path toward understanding the relation between the work and the necessity it expresses. The deciphering of the Proustian inner book is inseparable from the observation of the laws and the transformations of society, and the affirmation that the work is the translation of the unique world seen by each artist is strictly complemented by the thesis that each of these unique visions “reflects in its own way the most general laws of the species and a moment of evolution,” so that a hillside by Marguerite Audoux and a prairie by Tolstoy can be relined into a single frame.<sup>13</sup>

These examples should suffice to show how frivolous it is to oppose art for art’s sake and the writer’s ivory tower to the hard laws of social reality, or the creative power of works to the cultural and sociological relativization of literature and art. Literature and civilization are terms that imposed themselves simultaneously. Literature considered as the free creation of individual genius and literature considered as testimony to the spirit or manners of a society derive from the same revolution that, by making poetry a mode of language, replaced the principle of representation with that of expression. Those who invented “literature” in France (Sismondi, Barante, Villemain, Guizot, Quinet, Michelet, Hugo, Balzac, and a few others) simultaneously invented what they called “civilization” and we call “culture.” They laid down the hermeneutic principles of history and sociology, the sciences that give the silence of things its eloquence as a true testimony about a world or refer any proffered speech to the mute truth expressed by the speaker’s attitude or the writer’s paper. The opposition between the creative individual and the collectivity or that between artistic creation and cultural commerce can only be formulated on the basis of the same idea of language and the same rupture of the representative circle. This circle defined a

certain society of the speech act, a set of legitimate relations and criteria of legitimacy between the author, his “subject,” and his spectator. The rupture of this circle makes the sphere of literature and that of social relations coextensive. It places the singularity of the work and the community it manifests in a direct relation of reciprocal expression. Each expresses the other but this reciprocity has no possible norm. The notion of genius is what makes the passage from one side to the other possible. Romantic genius is that of an individual only insofar as it is also that of a place, a time, a people, a history. Literature is the accomplishment of the non-normative power of poeticity only insofar as it is also the “expression of society.” These statements would be equally valid if reversed. Every age and form of civilization “bears its literature, just as every geological age is marked by the appearance of certain species of organized orders that belong to a single system.” But also: “A poem creates a people. It was heroic Greece that produced Homer, and from Homer that civilized Greece emerged.”<sup>14</sup>

A people makes a poem, a poem makes a people. The formula of the equation appears under both figures from the beginning. There are those who dream of a new poem for a people still to come. “The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism,” tossed onto paper during the French Revolution by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, is the talisman of this dream. There are also those who search in the poems of the past for the physiognomy of the people who made them. This is the path adopted by Mme de Staël, who will hand it on to the historians of literature of the age of Louis-Philippe. But it was above all Hegel—a somewhat older Hegel, that of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*—who will set out the principles of the latter group, later to be systematized by Taine as a positive science of literature. The interminable quarrel between the guardians and the demystifiers of art is based on the infinite reversibility of the formula. In the 1830s, Gautier polemicized against “social art”; in the 1860s, Taine identified the history of English literature with the physiology of a people. At the turn of the century, Lanson imposed the history of literary creators upon the republican school in preference to that of the literary history of societies; Sartre and Bourdieu, in the most recent half-century, demystified the illusion of the creator. The supporters of “universalism” can today attack “cultural relativism” and wax indignant over those who dare to put the sublime art of Shakespeare and the vulgar manufacture of boots into the single category of “culture.” In each case, the terms opposed to one another live off of their solidarity. Shakespeare’s genius has only been imposed as an artistic model since it has been admitted that both his plays and the manufacture of boots are expressions of a single civilization. This is why Marxist sociology has been able to take up so large a part of the heritage of the sciences of spirit for its own profit. No doubt Lukács repudiated his *Theory of*

*the Novel* as the sin of a young man still caught in the hermeneutic idealism of the *Geisteswissenschaften* dominant within German universities before 1914. His analyses have nonetheless been broadly taken up as a materialist explanation of the relation between novelistic form and bourgeois domination. “Spirit” is the very name of the convertibility between the power of expression that manifests itself in the work and the collective power that the work manifests. It is vain to oppose the illusion of those who believe in the absoluteness of literature to the wisdom of those who know the social conditions of its production. Literature as an expression of individual genius and literature as an expression of society are the two versions of a single text; they express one and the same mode of perception of works and the art of writing.

FROM GENERALIZED POETICS TO THE MUTE LETTER

# PART //



# CHAPTER 4

## FROM THE POETRY OF THE FUTURE TO THE POETRY OF THE PAST

“**A**RT FOR art’s sake” and literature as the expression of society are two ways to express the same historic mode of the art of writing. This does not mean that this mode is not in itself contradictory; indeed, literature itself could well be only the development of this contradiction. Nonetheless, the contradiction still needs to be identified more precisely. At first sight, the art of speaking now seems to be deployed between two vanishing points. On one side, the singular form of the work risks being reduced to the simple manifestation of a collective way of being; on the other, it is threatened with a reduction to the sole virtuosity of an individual mode of doing. In the polemic of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* that Hegel delivered in the 1820s, this double peril can be summarized by two names. The first is that of Friedrich Wolff, the great philologist who radicalized Vico’s thesis by affirming the historical non-existence of Homer. His *Prolegomena to Homer*, published in 1795, presented an argument based on the disparity between the parts of the Homeric poems and proposed that they should be seen as a compilation of works written by different authors at different periods. The second name is Friedrich Richter, known as Jean Paul, the author of the erratic novels in which the writer constantly stages himself and privileges his humor at the expense of both his

inconsistent characters and his directionless stories. But this polarity, which makes the romantic paradigm seem to shuttle between cultural anonymity and the pure individual signature, is not rooted in the divergence of principles and ends between artistic individuality and the social or political community. The contradiction of the social and the individual is only a superficial expression of a more fundamental contradiction that is located at the very heart of the new definition of poetic *originality*.

Antirepresentative poetics has two principles that contradict one another. According to the principle of indifference, no subject dictates a form or a style proper to it. There is nothing that the poet is obliged to say in a determinate manner. What is proper to art is the realization of a pure intentionality through any subject whatsoever. But if poeticity is a mode of being of language, on the contrary, it is a determinate relation between language and what it says. In opposition to any principle of indifference, poetry is characterized by its motivation, by its resemblance to what it says. Unlike the free artist, the poet cannot express something other than what he expresses and cannot express it in another mode of language. Vico's comparisons with the language of the deaf and dumb posed the paradox once and for all: Poetry is a language insofar as it is the deficiency of language. It is the product of a language that cannot say what it says properly; the expression of a thought that cannot present itself as such. Its harmony with a state of development of human thought derives from the identity of this originating virtue with an original defect. Poetry identifies its history with the history of thought only under the heading of prehistory. If it agrees with the history of "reason and philosophy," in Mme de Staël's words, it is as a survival of what that development must leave behind. Romantic poetics is thus confronted with a dilemma. It can either adopt this teleological history as its own, which makes the new poetics essentially a new hermeneutics of past poetry, or proclaim itself the principle of production of a new poetry. This second option obliges it to construct in theory, and realize in practice, literature as the union of the contradictory principles of a specific difference inscribed in the objective life of language and spirit and of an absolute indifference of the form in which artistic will is realized.

Hegelian aesthetics can be described as the radical systematization of the first path. It is less the choice of one side than the rejection of the need to choose, the rejection as a matter of principle of the possibility that literature could be a new mode for the products of the art of writing and a new mode of dealing with the correspondences between the arts. Hegel's theory of poetry in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* pursues a double goal. At a first level, it presents a solution to the dilemma of the individual and the collective. Hegel seeks to do away with the

double loss of art summarized by the symmetrical enterprises of Friedrich Wolff and Jean Paul, philological demystification and of lawless “fancy.” His poetics determine the proper relation between knowledge and non-knowledge, between the linguistic manifestation of meaning and the muteness of stone, between collective modes of being and the singular utterance of art that will assure the status of poeticity. But this is only possible at the cost of a radicalization of the thesis that assimilates poetry with a certain *state of language* or historical mode of thought and thus a transformation of the tension between the principles of romantic poetics into a separation between ages of spirit. The polemic against Jean Paul’s “fancy” and humor thus aims at something entirely different than the mere equilibrium of individual artistic creation and collective expression. It produces a radical disjunction between the two principles of romantic poetics—language-as-thought and the indifference of what is represented—and transforms them into separate ages: the modern or “literary” age, where what is represented is indifferent, and the age of poetry, where thought is present in the work’s exteriority. The endpoint of Hegel’s theory is the impossibility of the emergence from romantic poetics of a new figure of the art of writing—the new figure that the following two centuries will pursue under the name of literature.

Far from giving literature guarantees against the forms of dissociation that are inherent in the duality of its principles, Hegel takes as his target the attempt to reconcile them and make romanticism into the principle of a generalized poetics. Thirty years earlier, this effort at reconciliation had been the project of the young Romantics of the *Athenaeum* circle, who had given this idea of a generalized poetics its most radical formulation: a poetry already present in the “poem written in a marvelous language” of nature, concentrated in the objective mirror of nature and the artist’s “fancy,” capable of poeticizing each thing and making every finite reality a hieroglyph of the infinite. Certainly, Schiller had introduced a discontinuity in this vision when he distinguished between the two forms and two ages of poetry, naive and sentimental. For Schiller, “naïve” is the poetry whose production is inseparable from the spontaneous consciousness of a world that itself does not distinguish the natural from the cultural or the poetic from the prosaic. Ancient Greek poetry, far removed from any primitive idiocy, bears witness to this “naïveté” in its expression of the continuity between subjective feeling, collective mode of life, common religion, and artistic form. “Sentimental” is the poetry proper to modernity; it is the poetry of a world that yearns after a lost nature and contrasts the feelings of the heart with the prose of the social order or civilized arts and institutions with natural manners. Sentimental poetry knows that it is a separate form that is opposed to the prosaic

world and is obliged to establish its value in opposition to that world. But Schiller also called for an ideal poetry to overcome this separation, and post-Kantian philosophy would offer its principle. The objectivist theory of an inherently poetic world could serve as the basis for a subjectivist theory of poetic fancy. Nature, Schelling tells us in a paraphrase of Kant, is a “poem that lies hidden in a mysterious and marvelous script.” The key to this poem may be lost, the grand world of generalized poetics frozen as if by a spell in the dreary objectivity of dead things and the prosaic world. But the new philosophy, speaking through Fichte, offers a way to forge it anew. In its self-identity, the *I* of transcendental subjectivity already possesses the principle of the union of subjective and objective, of the finite and the infinite. It can thus break the “spell” that encloses the poem of nature, that is, recognize it for what it is in its divine essence and for what it must become in human reality: the “imagination become sensuous.” “Imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*) here is to be understood not as the faculty of making fictions but as the power of *Bildung* that produces “images,” which are the forms of life, the stages of a process of education of artistic humanity. “Fichte’s *I*—is a Robinson,” says Novalis.<sup>1</sup> Such an imagination is the capacity to recreate the equivalent of a lost world, the wave of spirit that reawakens the scattered letters of nature’s poem, the voice and rhythm that transform the prose of consonants into song. It is the pure subjectivity that works upon a common world. “*Fabulous works of art* could come into being here—as soon as one begins to Fichticize artistically.”<sup>2</sup>

Romanticism is, therefore, not condemned to dream of the lost paradise of naïveté, which can be inscribed in a single historical teleology with a program for a new poetry. This teleology of rediscovered continuity between a poetry immanent in the world and a poetry drawn from subjectivity may in fact be what is expressed by Schlegel’s concept of the “fragment.” The fragment has often been thought of as the mark of an unfinished and detotalized status proprio modern works. Such an interpretation can be assimilated with Blanchot’s theme of the “inoperative” work, in which case literature becomes an “experience of limits.” But this vision is doubtless overly pathetic. A fragment is not a ruin; it is much more a seed. “All ash is pollen,” says Novalis. The fragment is the unity in which every fixed thing is put back into the movement of metamorphosis. Philosophically, it is the finite figure of an infinite process. Poetically, it is the new expressive unity that replaces the narrative and discursive unities of representation. This conversion occurs in an exemplary way in fragment 77 of the *Athenaeum*: “A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments.”<sup>3</sup> Fragmenting the works of the past means undoing the bonds of their representative unity in

order to bring (back) to life their romantic nature as garlands of expressive fragments, hieroglyphs of a natural and linguistic poem, moments of a *formation*, of the *Bildung* that creates images, forms, and possibilities of life. It means setting them ahead of themselves and inscribing them within the same movement as the sketches of the new poetry, which simultaneously as both the infinite capacity of the poetic *I* and the production of a given provisional form, a given “individuality” in which it chooses to limit itself, in which subjective freedom is identical to the objective formation of a mind in a process of becoming.

The gap between the poem and what it says is thus not the deficiency of an immature language. On the contrary, it is the movement through which poetry forever projects itself beyond its determinate figures and projects those figures into the process of a life in formation. The fragment’s power of division is identical with the project’s power of anticipation, just as the dissolving faculty of wit is identical with the unifying faculty of the symbol. Fragment 22 of the *Athenaeum* expresses this identity in nature of the fragment and the project:

A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object. A perfect project should be at once completely subjective and completely objective, should be an indivisible and living individual. In its origin: completely subjective and original, only possible in precisely this sense; in its character: completely objective, physically and morally necessary. The feeling for projects—which one might call fragments of the future—is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction, progressive in the former, regressive in the latter. What is essential is to be able to idealize and realize objects immediately and simultaneously: to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself. Since transcendental is precisely whatever relates to the joining and separating of the ideal and the real, one might very well say that the feeling for fragments and projects is the transcendental element of the historical spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The fragment is any expressive unity, any metamorphic unity whatsoever—dream, pebble, or joke, citation, or program—in which past and future, ideal and real, subjective and objective, or conscious and unconscious exchange their powers. It is the past made present and the present thrown into the future. It is the invisible become sensuous and the sensuous spiritualized. It is at once the self-presentation of the subject-artist, the individuality of the work in which he is abolished, and a moment in the great process of the formation of the world of spirit. “Romantic” poetry thus realizes the identity of opposites: In it, “the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself,” and nonetheless it can

“become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age.”<sup>5</sup> But this identity of opposites is an identity in the course of becoming: the perpetual shuttle between creative subjectivity and the fragment in which it presents itself without exhausting itself prefigures and forms a world-spirit to come in which the very difference between the artist and the work of art must be abolished. This potential identity between the work of art and the artist-as-work, between individual fancy and the formation of a common world, is supported by the identity between artistic form—form as the product of an act of making—and form of life—form as the presentation of living movement.

The poetics of the fragment thus offers the dreamed-of unity between the principle of equality and the principle of symbolicity. The fragment is a symbol: a random bit and microcosm of a world. It is both a free fabrication of the imagination and a living form borne along with the movement of forms of life. In its Romantic birth, the fragment is not the detotalization that founds literature as an experience of the impossible, but rather the resolution of the new totality’s contradictions. Literature’s emergence from this moment occurs by scission of what the fragment aimed to gather together. In fact, the entire history of literature can be characterized as the fate of this “garland of fragments” that presented the image of another totality in opposition to the former narrative and discursive order.

The theory of the fragment thus created, as a successor to the lost world of “naïveté,” a new poetry that was no longer the immediate consciousness of a world but its recreation on the basis of infinite subjectivity. Novalis used the mystico-poetical concept of magic to express this recreation, but it is equally possible for it to be presented as the new task of reason. This was the task set forth in the *Athenaeum* or “Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism”: the imagination’s unlimited sensuous capacity must be put at the service of the infinity of the ideas of reason and its power to render thought sensuous identified with the power of theory. Spirit would draw a new mythology from itself and poetry would gain the power of knowledge in compensation for its lost naïveté. Taking itself as a starting point, poetry would reconquer the power that makes language a “poem of the entire human race”; it would become capable of reflecting upon itself—of “theorizing” itself—in the form of a poem of its own poeticity and of poeticity in general. The successor to the lost epic would be the novel, the genre of mixed genres, in which story, song, and discourse would each manifest differently the principle of poeticity. In opposition to the Homeric epic in which the poet was effaced behind the presentation of a poetic world, the novel *Don Quixote* would present the poetic principle personified in a character, in his encounter with the world of prose, and in his battles to poeticize

every reality he encountered. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* presents this contrast even more clearly. As the hero's itinerary leads him to traverse the forms of poetry, the novel's prose becomes in truth a poem of poetry and a book of Life.

In opposition to this poetics of universalized poetry, Hegel draws its rigorous consequence: The strict corollary of the universalization of poetry is its historicization. Poetry is universal *insofar as* it is the language of a world that does not yet fully know itself. The unity between the fabrication of the poetic image and the movement of the forms of life belongs to a certain stage of development of human *action* and *creation* that is today a thing of the past. The heart of Hegel's demonstration is therefore quite naturally situated in the analysis of the epic and its world. This is first of all because the epic is identified with Homer and the question of Homer, ever since Vico, has summarized the question of the nature of poetry itself. But it is also the case because the epic is where the new definition of poeticity can best present and give a harmonious illustration, in the past, of its concept. "The epic work is the Saga, the Book, the Bible of a people, and every great and important people has such absolutely earliest books which express for it its own original spirit."<sup>6</sup> Hegel's formulation makes explicit the reversal of the classical generic principle. The epic, lyric, and tragic genres, which Hegel studies according to the order established by August Schlegel's *Lectures*, are no longer forms appropriate to the specific dignity of a subject. In particular, the epic is no longer the representation of gods and heroes in a specific compositional and metrical form; it has become the expression of the life of a people, the poetry that corresponds to a certain state of language, which itself reflects a state of relations between thought and world. The epic is thus the exemplary manifestation of the "naïveté" conceptualized by Schiller, which is not the idiocy of the first ages but the exact adequation of poetic power to its native soil and milieu. It is the poetry of a world that is already poetic, a world that does not know the separation of poetry and prose and in which the forms of common life and those of poetic enunciation refer to a single mode of *action* and *creation*.

Homer sings of a time when men's activities and the bonds that unite them were not yet objectivized, outside of them or above them, in the laws of the state, in industrial modes of fabrication or in the wheels of administration, when they are familiar manners of being and doing, character traits, feelings, and beliefs. In this world,

for his external life man needs house and garden, tents, seats, beds, swords and lances, ships for crossing the sea, chariots to take him to battle, kettles and roasting-tins, slaughter of animals, food and drink, but none of these and whatever else he may need, should have been only dead means

of livelihood; on the contrary he must still feel himself alive in them with his whole mind and self, and therefore give a really human, animated, and individual stamp to what is inherently external by bringing it into close connection with the human individual.

It is this individual and collective mode of being, at the antipodes of mechanism and the modern state, that Homer's poems express: "Here we have before us in domestic life neither barbarism nor the purely intellectual prose [*verständige Prosa*] of an ordered family and political life, but that originally poetic middle stage [*Mitte*] that I described above."<sup>7</sup>

This is the "milieu" that Homer's poetry reflects. In order to do so, it must itself participate in that milieu. Not, however, as the anonymous voice of the archaic people whose echo would be dispersed in scattered poems; instead, it participates as the voice of an artist who is one just as this world is one. The objectivity of the epic poem requires that "the poet as *subject* must retire in the face of his *object* and lose himself in it," and nevertheless, "an epic poem as an actual work of art can spring from *one* individual only."<sup>8</sup> Homer must still be attached to the world he describes, but he must already be far enough away from it, at a sufficient temporal distance, for the diffuse poeticity of a collective mode of life to be grasped as the principle of an individual work. But this collective world whose bard he is, the world of the nonseparation of activities, is itself the world of individuals *par excellence*. The substantial community of ethical life only appears in it as the manifestation of the activity and character of individuals. The epic unity of modes of action and creation is most eminently manifest in the description of the warrior-chiefs who are equally makers of their own domestic objects and cooks and servers for their guests.

The heroes kill and roast their own food; they break in the horse they wish to ride; the utensils they need they more or less make for themselves [...]. Agamemnon's scepter is a family staff, hewn by his ancestor himself, and inherited by his descendants. Odysseus carpentered himself his huge marriage bed; and even if the famous armor of Achilles was not his own work, still here too the manifold complexity of activities is cut short because it is Hephaestus who made it at the request of Thetis.<sup>9</sup>

The epic world is poetic—antiprosaic—because it is the exact adequation between a collective *ethos* and individual characters. The individuality of the Homeric book of the people is in the image of this unity. Homer writes his poem as Atreus sculpted his scepter and Odysseus his matrimonial bed. This is why

this poem can be simultaneously a book of life, sculpted from the tissue of collective life, and the necessarily individual work of a unique artist.

The epic is then as much the utopia of the poem as a form of poetry. It manifests the exactly reciprocal expression of an individual creative genius and the poeticity inherent in a common world. It realizes in an exemplary way the adequation of meaning and sensuous matter that is the essence of art as a mode of thought: a manifestation of thought outside itself, a thought that has been entirely transferred into the exteriority of stone or the monolithic character. The action of the epic hero, like the figure of the god of stone, expresses this incarnation of a thought in plastic form, overcoming both the muteness of the sign and the equivocal language of the symbol. The carefully calibrated equilibrium of Hegel's aesthetics depends upon this adequation between a classical theory of form given to the idea and the romantic idea of the poem as a thought still foreign to itself. The stone god whose muteness is the sensuous form of the idea and the monolithic epic hero who expresses the collective world of individuals represent a harmony between the adequate manifestation of thought and its difference from itself. This double harmony—that of both an individual poetic power and the poeticity of the world—is what properly defines classicism. But this definition of "classicism" presents the remarkable property of being nothing other than the formulation of Romantic poetics. Hegel, in an operation particular to his philosophy, transforms Romantic poetics into a theory of classicism. The work that is a language, the beautiful coincidence of form and signification, of the fabricated work and the living form, or of creative individuality and collective poeticity—everything that Novalis and the Schlegel brothers had assigned to the poetry of the future as its task—all this is a thing of the past. Romantic poetics has been turned around against its theorists, as their program for the future becomes an interpretation of the past. This interpretation of the past, in turn, shows that the program for the future has no future. Schiller's break is radicalized, and the destiny of the epic allegorizes that of poetry in general. The epic is the glory of a world—the world before the state and the division of labor—but it is also its swansong. It is a utopia in the past tense whose other side is the impossibility of the new utopia of the poem as a book of Life.

Hegel, in effect, generalizes the paradox of this Romantic classicism. In order for the idea be made manifest at the same time as it disappears in the form of art, there must be an exact coincidence between what the artist wants to do and what he does not want to do, what he does without knowing or wanting it. This condition ties the success of art to the decline of the very positivity that gives it consistency. Homer makes his poem like Atreus his scepter or Ulysses his bed. But the necessary identity between what he does and what he does not

do binds him to the destiny of the epic hero, who himself is heroic on account of the identity forged in his “thing” (*Sache*) between his own will and the exteriority of the event that awaits him. Epic glory and poetic success rest upon the “sandbank of the finite.” The Homeric story leads the collective world of individuals together with Achilles toward their deaths. It is crucial to see just what this end means. Such a “collective world of individuals” was what a group of exalted young men—namely Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling—had projected into the future when, around 1800, they sketched out the “Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism.” At the time they dreamed of a world of freedom in which the mechanical law of the state would be replaced by the living spirit of the community, in which the ideas of reason would become a common poem, would be made “aesthetic,” *that is*, “mythological,” in order to consecrate the harmony of thinkers and the people in a new religion.<sup>10</sup> The Hegelian theory of the epic leads yesterday’s future to its death, showing it to be the past of the state and the community, not their future.

But this liquidation of a political utopia of poeticity also fixes the fate of poetry itself. The exemplary adequation of the epic community, its hero, and its poet translates the natural “poeticity” of a world before statist and industrial rationalizations of human activity. But it is also produced against the backdrop of the non-adequation that is at the principle of the “language” of art. Art is a manifestation of a thought outside itself, caught in the material it animates and raises to ideality: stone, wood, color, sound or language; a thought that makes itself the soul of a painting, the smile of a god of stone, or the image and rhythm of a poem. It is a manifestation of a thought still exterior, still obscure to itself, in a language whose poetic virtue is linked to its non-transparency. Poetry’s virtue is indeed identical with the double defect that Vico had analyzed: the difficulty for spirit to know its own power, and the difficulty for language to become the simple instrument of thought. Poetry’s power of thought is that of a mind that still only knows itself in the figures and rhythm of a language that itself is still caught in the figuration of images and the temporal thickness of its materiality. This is what puts it in harmony with a world in which individual and collective activities are not yet subject to juridical or economic rationality. This is also what makes it a moment of the history of relations between thought, its language, and its world—a moment that is destined to disappear. The time of bourgeois society and of the modern state does not merely deprive the activities of the empirical world of their poeticity. This time is also one in which mind has become conscious of its own domain and has taken possession of a language that has become a neutral instrument for the expression of thought. Spirit no longer needs to know itself in its exterior manifestation, in the

fables, characters, images, and rhythms of poetry. It has no more need of poetry. But poetry too has lost its own matter, namely the double opacity of language to signification and of signification to itself.

Hegel asks us to draw all the consequences of the romantic theory of poetry. This theory makes poetry a symbolic language, but symbolism only lends itself to the form of art insofar as it is inadequate to express thought. The adequation of linguistic expression and sensuous form is only a transitory moment of conciliation. As a principle of art, Romantic poetics has already been fulfilled, and it was fulfilled as classicism. In the present, Romanticism can be no more than Schiller's "sentimentalism," the formal idea of the union to be forged between the subjective principle of poeticity and the objectivity of the prose of the world. Here is the real implication of Monsieur Jourdain's truism that one can speak only in verse or in prose. Poetry and prose are different modes of relating thought, language, and world. The literary innovators concluded from this that these modes of thought are distinct from simple empirical forms and that the essence of poetry can be realized in a novel in prose. But they did not go to end of this logic. These modes of relating thought, language, and world are historical modes. Prose is not merely a way of passing from one line to the next, nor merely a metaphor opposing empirical reality to the dreams of imagination; it is an historical world that prescribes the end of poetry as an essential form of thought, a form of representation of the mind's "grand interests." Certainly, one can continue to write sonnets, tragedies, or eclogues for as long as one wants. But these will quite simply no longer have the status of the Egyptian pyramid, Greek tragedy, or Shakespearean drama: that of a mode of thought in which thought represents its own content in the exteriority of a figure. In the age of the prose of the world, the mind's own knowledge of itself is stated in the prose of philosophy and science. There is no sublation of poeticity, no poetics of prose. Poetry attempts in vain to surpass itself and become its own theory. It can leave the domain of art but not thereby enter that of philosophy.

We must thus see clearly the abyss contained within Hegel's oft-cited description of the novel as a "modern bourgeois epic."<sup>11</sup> Lukács made this formula the principle of his *Theory of the Novel*, and it is frequently taken as the foundation of a Hegelian theory of literature. But this judgment does not initiate a theory of the novel; rather, it closes the theory of the novel that Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel had elaborated on the basis of *Don Quixote* and *Wilhelm Meister*. Wilhelm Meister's rupture with the world of business, his theatrical experiences and his discussions about theater, his meeting with Mignon and her song, symbols of the "poetry of nature," and his final accession to a wisdom which is that of aesthetics as a mode of life, all made Goethe's novel, in Friedrich

Schlegel's analysis, the very prototype of the "poetry of poetry," itself presenting the poetic theory of its poeticity and the theory of poetic existence in general.<sup>12</sup> Even as he renders the inevitable homage to Goethe, Hegel reverses the vision. What Schelling or the Schlegel brothers took as a principle of "infinite poeticity," Hegel sees as the mark of an historical closure. The epic was the poem of an "originally poetic state of the world." The novel presents itself as an effort to give this lost poeticity back to the world. But such an effort is contradictory; one cannot restore poeticity to a world that has lost it. The novel, then, is condemned to represent its own condition: the gap between poetic aspirations and the prose of the bourgeois world. Far from the ambitions of Goethe or Friedrich Schlegel, the essential content of the *Bildungsroman* is the comedy of the ideal: the novel of young bourgeois who have broken with family, society, the state, and business, but who, after having bummed around for a while, end up as philistines like everyone else.<sup>13</sup> Otherwise the content simply disappears. The situations and events are only "*bouts rimés*" (Novalis) or a "dictionary of rhymes" (Jean Paul). The novel has no object other than the infinite repetition of the act that repoeticizes every prosaic thing. In practice, this submission of all finite reality to the self-affirmation of the Fichtean *I* becomes the pure demonstration of the artist's virtuosity, an occasion for the novelist to constantly valorize the fancy in which the poetic power to transform all finite reality into a hieroglyph of the infinite is concentrated. But this power can only be demonstrated by the destruction of every object. The principle of indifference then devours the principle of poeticity. The truth of the novel is the "humor" exemplified by the works of Jean Paul. The author is always on stage; he accumulates prefaces and appendixes, appendixes to prefaces and prefaces to appendixes, finally agrees to set in motion a character who is his double and throw him into an insignificant story, but only to accompany him, substitute himself for him, and forget him along the way in order to begin a poetic digression or a discussion with the reader. "Poetry" is nothing more than the continual dissolution of representation, the act of self-exhibition, the exhibition of an empty intention at the expense of every object. Romantic poetics has been turned upside down. It began with an opposition between the restricted poeticity of a "living speech" reduced to an oratorical setting and the scene of writing: the scene of the word become flesh, of nature become a poem, or of pure fancy everywhere tracing the hieroglyphs or arabesques of the infinite. The random and directionless adventures of Jean Paul's inconsistent heroes transform this great scene where "everything speaks" into the pure wandering of the dead letter. Jean Paul dedicated the novel to the fulfillment of the poetic task of teaching us to read the world's signs, of being their grammar and dictionary. "Our soul writes on souls with twenty-six

signs of signs (that is, with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet); Nature does it with millions of signs.”<sup>14</sup> Does not this so-called language of the symbols of the soul, which claims to speak to the soul as nature speaks to us, in the end become like the lifeless and desiccated signs of the alphabet? What Jean Paul’s stories oppose to the Aristotelian poetics of the well-constructed plot, according to Hegel, is no longer the unity of individual poetic power and the substantial spirit of a collectivity, but its reverse: the unity of the caprice of fancy with the erratic circulation of paper, that is, anti-spirit.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE BOOK IN PIECES

**T**HUS HEGEL twice invalidates the pretensions of the new poem, the poem that proves itself in the form of prose itself. In its objectivist form, the novelistic poem dissolves in the prose of the bourgeois world. In its subjectivist version, it reduces the work to the mere exhibition of the dead sign of art, to the artist's signature. Romanticism then cannot be the principle of a new poetics. It is the entry of poetry and art into the era of their dissolution. The principle of this dissolution is the incompatibility of the two organizing principles of antirepresentative poetics: the principle that makes poetry a specific mode of language and the principle that decrees the indifference of the form to the subject represented. If poetry and art are modes of language and thought, they cannot be subject to a principle of indifference. Art is a language insofar as it states the necessary (whether adequate or not) relation between a thought and its object. It disappears wherever this relation is indifferent. No doubt Hegel is guilty of some amount of bad faith when he reduces the "progressive universal poetry" of the Schlegel brothers to Jean Paul's humor even as he simply repeats their sarcasms against him. He nonetheless formulates the paradox in which the whole debate over the enterprise of literature will take place. Literature will, in fact, be the interminable effort to

define in theory and construct in practice a coherence between the opposed principles. Examples of this effort will include Flaubert's "book about nothing," which must find the unique sonorous form that makes each sentence a manifestation of the Idea, and Proust's paradox of the book that has been "printed in us" but whose deciphering is to be the work of a book in which "there is not a single incident which is not fictitious."<sup>1</sup> But Hegel's ferocity against Jean Paul's stories of students and schoolmasters also unveils, behind the contradiction between the expressive principle of necessity and the anti-representative principle of indifference, a more profound contradiction whose site of election is the eponymous genre of Romanticism, the nongeneric genre of the novel (*roman*). The novel no longer merely sets the necessity of writing in opposition to the indifference of a subject. It sets two visions of writing in opposition to one another. In one, writing is the Word that bears witness to the power of incarnation present in poetry, the people, and stone; in the other, writing is a letter without a body that could vouch for its truth and is thus available for any use and any speaker. Behind the opposition between the two master principles that split Romantic aesthetics is a conflict between two writings that turns out to be the hidden truth of the new literature.

One of the fables—and one of the heroes—whose inconsistency Hegel denounces might help us understand this conflict. In 1809, Jean Paul published his *Life of Fibel*, a work whose title already indicates its humorous formula. *Fibel* was then the common name for German primers (some think the name derived from the Bible, *Bibel*). Jean Paul transforms this common name into a proper name by inventing a Fibel who is the supposed author of the book that bears his name. The fiction consists entirely in the narrator's attempts to reconstitute Fibel's life and work. The task is very difficult, he tells us, since the sources cannot be found. Tired of consulting scholars and libraries in vain, he turns toward flea-markets and used booksellers. And so in the stock of a used bookstore run by a converted Jew he finds the remnants of a monumental work, the 40 volumes of the life and works of Fibel of which only the covers remain. Except for a few pages, in fact, the content was scattered to the winds by French soldiers. Luckily, the inhabitants of the village gathered the far-flung pages and used them to make coffee filters, kites, dress patterns, pipe lighters, chair covers, and herring wrappers. The narrator then sets the village's urchins to the task of reassembling, one by one, the detached pages of the book that have been recycled for these picturesque uses. We hear the hero's story in the course of this process of recollection. The son of a Fowler, young Fibel had taken an early passion not for reading but for letters as such, letters in their materiality. One night a rooster appeared to him in a dream, giving him the principle of his "works": the

assimilation, by way of *Ha* (onomatopoeia for the figure of a rooster), of the letter H and the word *Hahn* (the fowl's name in German). Various adventures follow until all the sources on Fibel's life are exhausted. At the end, he turns out to be a completely forgotten centenarian in a neighboring hamlet.

According to his biographers, Jean Paul uses this fable of the book in pieces to tell an ironic tale about the fate of his own youthful works, which had been similarly recycled into all sorts of practical uses on account of poor sales. In the eyes of his critics, such as August Wilhelm Schlegel or Hegel, the story above all symbolizes his aleatory method of composition. But it is easy to perceive that this "fantastical" story follows a proven novelistic model, one borrowed precisely from the founding work of the modern tradition of the novel, *Don Quixote*. The fiction of the book recomposed on the basis of the chance encounter of recycled sheets of paper comes directly from chapter 9 of *Don Quixote*. In chapter 8, the narrator had suddenly interrupted the tale his hero's misadventures in the middle of the battle with the Biscainer. The manuscript he possessed, he said, stopped there, and he had searched in vain for other sources about the life of the wandering knight. In the following chapter, however, a stroke of good luck occurred. In the streets of Toledo, the narrator met a boy who was going to sell old sheaves of paper to the silk merchants. Driven by his passion to read everything, "though it be torn papers thrown about the streets," he took one of the sheaves and found that it was written in Arabic characters. Through the intermediary of a hispanicized Moor, he learned that the manuscript contained the story of Don Quixote, written by an Arab historian, Cid Hamet Ben Engeli. Nothing remained for the story to be able to resume its course but to translate the books.

In transposing this tale of recycled paper, Jean Paul borrows from the model of novelistic fancy not only an episode, but also a certain relation between narration and story. For the fable of the book in a foreign language, saved *in extremis* from industrial recycling, is not merely an episode in Cervantes's novel. It has a role in the very precise game that, throughout the book, doubles the fiction of the unlucky knight who is the victim of books with a fictionalization of the narrative function itself. At times, the narrator presents himself as a simple copyist who depends upon the chance of encountered material to be able to relate his story. At other times, he assumes—and the author assumes through him—a function of mastery over the character and the story. This play is particularly prominent in the second book, written to respond to the "continuation" composed by a plagiarist, in which Don Quixote visits the print shop where his own story is being printed, and arbitrates between the true and false versions of his exploits. Jean Paul did not only borrow the story of the recycled manuscript

from Cervantes. He also borrowed from him the mode of enunciation that accompanies it, this play with the reality of the narrative function that had been perfected in the meantime by the eighteenth-century “humorists,” Sterne chief among them. Jean Paul’s “fancy” participates in a tradition of putting writing into fable, associating a particular kind of story—that of the love of written signs—with a play upon the enunciation of the fable.

But Cervantes had not made up the story of the found manuscript on his own either. It is a parodic version of a novelistic *topos* that is illustrated in particular by the book that is Cervantes’s principle target, *Amadis de Gaule*. The preface of *Amadis* relates how the manuscript containing the hero’s story had been found by chance in the dungeons of an abandoned castle. The genealogy of the fable does not stop there. Chivalric novels such as *Amadis* are themselves inscribed in a long tradition that, through the *Roman de Troie*, the *Roman de Thèbes*, and the *Roman d’Alexandre*, ties the tales of chivalry to the great stories of antiquity. The book found in *Amadis*, moreover, has its model in a singular “exhumation” that occurred in the third century of the Common Era, namely the “discovery” of the “true” stories of the Trojan war, supposedly written—in order to confound Homer the liar—by two authentic witnesses of the war, who had fought in each of the two opposing camps: on the Trojan side, Dares the Phrygian, a companion of Antenor; on the Achaian side, Dictys the Cretan, a companion of Idomeneus. A preface and a missive describing the circumstances under which the manuscript was discovered precede Dictys’s story. Many centuries after the fall of Troy, under the reign of Nero, Dictys’s tomb was destroyed during an earthquake in Crete and its interior opened to view. Some shepherds noticed the presence of a small box. Instead of the treasure they hoped for, they found five tablets containing writing in the Phoenician alphabet. When translated the manuscript turned out to contain the memoirs of Dictys, who had ordered his story to be buried together with him. But the story does not stop there. Whenever someone talks about correcting Homer, Plato is never far behind. This story of an earthquake and of shepherds eager to profit from it by robbing graves clearly takes up the elements of a story told by Plato in the second book of the *Republic*: that of the shepherd Gyges, whom an earthquake had enabled to penetrate into a chasm in the earth, where he found, on the hand of a corpse, a golden ring that made him invisible and allowed him to seduce the queen of Lydia, kill the king, and take his place.

The novelistic *topos* of the saved manuscript thus seems to stem from this primordial fable.<sup>2</sup> But what theoretical status should be given to the similarities and transformations between these episodes? What relation is there between Jean Paul’s pranks, mocked by Hegel, and the crimes of Gyges, invoked

by Glaucus to show that no one chooses justice if he knows he can be unjust without fear of punishment? What link does the novelistic story of the found manuscript establish between them? And in what way does this link concern the very idea of literature? To attempt to answer these questions, we must turn toward another set of transformations of the story of the scattered book, not in the 15 centuries preceding the *Life of Fibel* this time but in the 30 years following it. These years saw the development of autobiographies of children of the popular classes that include a more-or-less obligatory episode: the story of the encounter with the world of writing. One day, in an open-air market, in a plaza or a port where he was passing on other business, in an abandoned attic or a house where he had taken refuge, the child chances upon a book—always only one—or rather, less than a book. In these stories, in fact, the volume is always faded and incomplete. Its cover is missing, and perhaps the title page as well. It may not even be a book but merely a piece of paper picked up in the street or food wrappers that, for the child, become the fragments of a marvelous encyclopedia. The exceptional and life-altering encounter with writing is always associated with this transitional status between two universes: the ownerless book that is about to leave the circuit of meaning to be recycled as pure matter, good for any industrial or domestic use, or the aleatory collection of wrapping papers that is transformed into a volume. From Claude Genoux's *Mémoires d'un enfant de la Savoie*, published by the one-time chimney sweep in 1844, to *Marie-Claire*, published by the former shepherdess Marguerite Audoux in 1910, the story undergoes a thousand variations, but its fundamental components remain the same: the chance nature of the encounter, with the two variants of the open-air market and the abandoned building; the degradation of what barely continues to be a book; the uniqueness of the book that stands in all the more forcefully for all books; the entry into a new life.<sup>3</sup> The *topos* of the found book—even of the book in pieces—proper to novelistic fancy is transformed into a social fable of the entry into writing. Fable here is equivalent to myth, in the sense of Plato's *muthoi*, those stories of the soul's destinies scattered throughout his dialogues, including in particular the story of Gyges the shepherd.

Still, what relation is there between the regicide shepherd and the joiners, typographers, shoemakers, or weavers, with their polite manners and dreamy minds, who tell us these stories of initiation into another destiny, that of men of writing? Significantly, it is men of letters who show us the answer, in their reactions to the novelty that, in the 1830s, was called workers' literature, the literature produced by these children of labor who had passed to the other side of the symbolic barrier of the book. Even more significantly, those who are worried by this invasion of the temple of art are not Aristotle's faithful, the

believers in the separation of genres and suitability. Rather it is the partisans of the new poetics—the partisans of a poetry without borders that unites the work of the inspired poet and the poem in stone of the anonymous people—who are worried. They are the ones who, by reactualizing the dark face of the fable of Don Quixote, seen as the victim of the book, establish the relation between the chance encounter with the book and the work of death. Charles Nodier opened the path by turning around the argument of those who believe that instruction will help combat crime. On the contrary, he says, instruction transforms the honest children of the popular classes into criminals.<sup>4</sup> In 1838, Victor Hugo staged the story of Ruy Blas, an orphan whose schooling has made a poet rather than a worker, and of his fatal love for a queen. The following year, in *The Country Parson*, Balzac told the story of Véronique Sauviat, the daughter of a blacksmith from Limoges whose life was so overturned by the chance encounter of a copy of *Paul and Virginia* on bookseller's stall that she became the inspiration for a great crime. In 1841, Eugène Lerminier, legal philosopher and privileged introducer of German philosophy, a former Saint-Simonian one-time editor of the *Globe*, denounced the peril of this new “literature” in the same *Revue des deux mondes* that had welcomed both the enthusiastic writings of the young romantics and the warning sounded by Gustave Planche. His article “De la littérature des ouvriers” was written following the suicide of the typographer Adolphe Boyer out of despair over the failure of his book. The book was not in fact about poetry but about the organization of labor, and Boyer died a disillusioned militant rather than a *poète maudit*. Still, his suicide became a symbol of the mortal vanity of “workers’ literature,” and Lerminier established once and for all the arguments that condemn it. First, these apprentices entering the terrain of literature can only be awkward imitators, sterile as far as art is concerned. Second, they are doomed to failure and all the seductions of despair. More profoundly, this entry into writing is not only the cause of the perdition of a few unhappy souls; it also disturbs the order that destines the men of tools for the regulated works of the tool and the men of thought to the nights of thinking. Seven years earlier, the same Lerminier had written, in the same journal, an article on popular sovereignty in support of the launching of his former co-religionists Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud’s *Encyclopédie populaire*. He had shown that this sovereignty was not a mere juridico-political principle but rather a complete system in historical development, including “a doctrine, a religion, a poetics and a politics.”<sup>5</sup> The seven intervening years have not only left his feelings about popular sovereignty lukewarm. Above all, through the apparently meager question of “workers’ literature,” they have brought the fissure in this harmonious coherence to light and shown the democratic

circulation of the letter to be the radical disturbance of any harmony between this poetics and this politics.

The Hegelian denunciation thus reveals a false bottom that is the false bottom of literature itself. Jokes about the book as a set of dispersed pages do not only symbolize the vain efforts of novelistic humor to repoeticize the world of prose. Behind the theoretical figure of the Fichtean apprentice lost in the endless labor of this repoeticization, behind Novalis's conquering Robinson turned into an unhappy Don Quixote, there lurks a more disturbing social figure, that of the apprentice of the world of thought.<sup>6</sup> Behind the fantastical stories of book in detached pages, darker fables of lost children and perverted workers are drawn. In fact, these stories find their model in the tale of Gyges. Plato had composed his fable by making a crucial transposition in the story told by Herodotus. In Herodotus's version, Gyges was a captain of the guard of Candaules, king of Lydia. Too proud of his wife's beauty, Candaules allowed a hidden Gyges to spy on her as she undressed. But when the queen perceived the stratagem, she seduced Gyges and armed him against her husband in order to avenge her humiliation. By inventing another Gyges—the ancestor of Herodotus's hero—Plato performs a double transformation of the story and its moral. The dissimulation imagined by the asinine Candaules becomes the secret of invisibility that Gyges discovers in the land of the dead and that awakens his vocation for ambition and crime. The officer becomes a shepherd, a man of the people *par excellence*, destined to the labors and pleasures of the fields, and perverted by the power of invisibility that, as the *Phaedo* reminds us, is the power of knowledge and the god of the dead. Gyges, in sum, is the first of the *déclassé* workers whose threat, in the modern age, will haunt the thought of respectable people. Beyond its immediate context, the fable's meaning derives from the principle that governs the Platonic republic: Everyone in the city must see to his own business, and above all the souls of iron, destined to the labor of sustenance, must not get involved in common affairs and in the realm of thought, which are the proper task of souls of gold. Lerminier's argument, like the plots of Nodier, Hugo, Balzac, and any number of their epigones, are modern variations on this golden rule of the Platonic republic.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE FABLE OF THE LETTER

In order to illustrate the link between the tale of the perverted shepherd, novelistic jokes about books lost and found, and the modern fable of the perdition of the children of the people, we must introduce two more Platonic myths. The first, another story about the land of the dead, comes at the end of the *Republic*: the story of Er the Pamphylian. Wounded and left for dead on the battlefield, he was able to see what happens in the beyond and give us a detailed account that reveals the crucial secret: Souls choose their own destiny from lots tossed randomly amongst them as on display in the market. The second is the myth of the invention of writing that Socrates presents at the end of the *Phaedrus*. King Thamus presents two arguments in opposition to Theuth's bragging about his invention. In the first place, writing is like a mute painting, only capable of imitating one thing and repeating it endlessly. Its speech is that of an orphan, deprived of the power of living speech, that is, the speech of the master: the ability to "defend itself," to answer when asked about what it says and thus to become a living seed that can itself bear fruit. Second, this muteness makes the written letter too talkative. Since it is not directed by a father who is capable of guiding it in a legitimate way to where it can bear fruit, written speech drifts all over the place. It is incapable of distinguishing

whom it should or should address and so talks to everyone in its mute way. In short, the king responds to the inventor's proposal of a useful technique by saying that writing is not simply a way to reproduce speech and preserve knowledge, but something else entirely. It is a specific regime of production and circulation of speech and knowledge, the regime of an orphaned utterance, of a speech that speaks by itself, that is forgetful of its origin and heedless of its audience. In the terms used by contemporary literary theorists, we could call it "self-referential" or "intransitive." But Plato's analysis, in fact, completely upsets the distinctions that these notions carry for us. The letter circulates on account of its "intransitivity"; its "self-referentiality" [*autotelisme*] makes it available for anyone to use for his own goals. The Platonic *muthos* shows that the opposition is not between communicative and non-communicative speech, but rather between two different stagings of the speech act. Speech speaking all by itself is not Sartre's "column of silence" erected for the benefit of initiates in a garden closed to the masses. Quite to the contrary, it is the destruction of any restricted scene for the transmission of speech. The specific mode of visibility and availability of the written letter overturns any relation by which a discourse might legitimately belong to the person who utters it, to whom it is addressed, or to the way in which it should be received. It muddles the way in which knowledge and discourse order visibility and establish authority.

Plato's text does not set forth the "deficiencies" of writing or the inferiority of written speech with respect to living speech. He brings to light an essential doubling within the idea of writing and uses it to formulate the concept of writing as a regime of speech. He does not define writing as the tracing of signs in opposition to vocal pronunciation but as a particular staging of the speech act. Writing always traces much more than the signs it aligns; it also traces a particular relation of bodies to their souls and to other bodies, and of the community to its soul. It is a specific distribution of the sensible, a specific structuring of a common world. For Plato this structuring appears as the undoing of any regulation of the legitimate order by which the *logos* distributes itself and distributes the bodies of a community. Earlier in the *Phaedrus*, the myth of the cicadas distinguished two categories of beings: the workers who come to take a nap in the shade at the hour when the cicadas sing, and the dialecticians, set apart from the workers by the leisure of speech, by the living and limitless exchange of speech. Even earlier in the text, the myth of the winged chariot and its fall had given these conditions a foundation in truth. The inequality of the incarnations of souls in a variety of conditions was linked to the ability or inability they had shown to bear the sight of celestial things. Social inferiority is the manifestation of the lack of dignity of a way of life separated from the true modes of *seeing* and *saying*.

Writing, then, is the regime for the utterance of speech that undoes the order that this hierarchy establishes among the “logical” capacities of beings. It undoes any ordered principle that might allow for the incarnation of the community of the *logos*. It introduces a radical dissonance in the communal symphony as Plato understands it, namely, as a harmony between the modes of *doing*, *being*, and *saying*. There are three elements in this harmony: the *occupations* of the citizens—what they “do,” but even more how they occupy their time; their *ethos*—their way of being in their place and signifying this occupation; and the communal *nomos*—the *nomos* that is not only the law but also the community’s *air*, its spirit in the sense of a fundamental tone, a rhythm vital to each and all. In Plato’s thought, this republican symphony harmonizes the occupations, modes of being, and tone of the community and stands in opposition to democratic anarchy. Indeed, democracy is not a regime whose difference from the others results merely from the distribution of powers, but more profoundly from its definition as a determinate distribution of the sensible, a specific redistribution of its space. The principle of this redistribution is the regime of the orphan letter in its availability, that is, what we call literariness. Democracy is the regime of writing, the regime in which the perversion of the letter is the law of the community. It is instituted by the spaces of writing whose overpopulated voids and overly loquacious muteness rends the living tissue of the communal *ethos*.

Plato’s polemic points out a few of these spaces of the mute and loquacious letter. On the Royal Portico of Athens, the laws are written on movable tablets that are stuck there like stupid, fatherless paintings, resembling—as the *Statesman* puts it—orders left by a doctor going on a voyage for whatever illness his patient might have. In the orchestra of the theater, Socrates tells us, one can buy the books of Pericles’ teacher Anaxagoras for a drachma, and learn that Mind has ordered all things on the basis of equal particles of matter. Finally, in the Athenian assembly, one can observe the power of a word that is both mute and talkative, a word that is uniquely capable of provoking too much talk: *demos*. Democracy is properly speaking the regime of writing, the regime in which the law is given by the wanderings of the orphaned letter, in which it occupies the place of living discourse, the place of the community’s living soul.

Plato’s quarrel with poetry and imitation in general is well known. This polemic concerns both the content of fables, whether epic or tragic, and their mode of enunciation. In the first place, these fables give a seductive appearance to their presentation of men overcome by intemperance, and thereby make us take pleasure in disturbances of the soul. The theatrical communication of pleasure, by manipulating these simulacra, imports and imprints in our souls

all the disturbances most capable of sapping civic virtue. Second, the poet lies not only about the gods and heroes that his mimetic simulacra turn into ethical counter-examples but also about himself, He hides the fatherhood of his discourse and abdicates responsibility for it by dissimulating his voice behind those of the actors in a tragedy or the characters in an epic. The poetic fiction disturbs the citizens' temperament by manipulating the contradictions of the passions and the duplicity of voices. But the lies of poets may not be the worst danger that threatens the ordered distribution of speech in the community. The disturbance provoked by writing is more radical than that of poetry. The mendacious fables told by poets do indeed imprint within the soul the marks of falsehood that allow the principles of injustice to grow, and the dissimulation by which they hide in their discourse establishes the reign of duplicity in the polity. But the mutely talkative painting that speaks without accompanying its statement is more fearsome than the fallacious model given to weak souls to imitate, and the orphaned discourse that trundles about everywhere more fearsome than the poem whose fatherhood is hidden. For if the disorder of poetic fiction is a manifestation of a poorly constituted polity, the disorder of literariness is constitutive of this perversion. It is identical with the very principle of a political order, democracy. This fundamental disorder is, in a sense, hidden behind the denunciation of the poetic lie, and it appears wherever the forms for regulating poetic disturbance fall apart.

For this disturbance can be regulated, and there were at least two different ways of doing so in Greek Antiquity. The first is the Platonic mode of political regulation, which is not merely the exclusion of poets. Plato regulates poetic disturbance in a positive fashion by proposing, in opposition to bad *mimesis*, a good *mimesis* (or rather another status for *mimesis*). Book X of the *Republic* sets forth the principle: Homer, the bad imitator, offers us appearances of appearances, such as Achilles, the “model” of courage, that is, a windbag stuffed with impetuous speeches and descriptions of shiny weapons, or Nestor, the phantom of wisdom. If he had actually known what wisdom and courage were, Homer would have led armies, given cities their laws, and educated wise and courageous men. This is the true *mimesis*, the imitation of a virtue in the living body and soul of an individual or a polity. It is the one used by Socrates, who is himself a work of art (as attested by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*), or by the philosophical lawmakers who, in book VII of the *Laws*, justify the exclusion of tragic imitators on the grounds that they themselves are the authors of tragedies and indeed of the best tragedy, the imitation of the finest life. In opposition to represented tragedy, they set living poetry: the choir or dance in which the citizens imitate the principle of the polity and fall under the charm of its air

or tone. The disorder that poetic fiction introduced into the polity is corrected by the city itself becoming the reality of the living poem, the fulfillment of good imitation.

The second form of regulation, set in place by Aristotle's *Poetics* and constitutive of the very idea of *ars poetica*, works in exactly the opposite way. Aristotle rejects the conflation Plato plays on between two kinds of imitation, that of the poet offering fables and characters and that of the soul acting or suffering according to the models that have been imprinted in it. Plato tied these two imitations together in a single theory of identification, according to which the theatrical simulacra of imitation were necessarily transformed into disturbances in the soul. Aristotle separates them and, rather than making the polity and the soul into true poems, circumscribes the place of *mimesis* among the activities of men and the occupations of the polity. He challenges the passive status of *mimesis* that led Plato to see it as a simulacrum leading to suffering, and instead gives it an active status as a mode of knowledge, which is inferior but still real. He can then define a system of legitimacy for *mimesis* on this basis: first, a positive virtue of the act of imitation as a specific mode of knowledge; second, a reality principle for fiction that circumscribes its specific space-time and its particular regime of speech (and the all-too-famous *catharsis* designates above all this autonomy of the effects of speech, this way of confining tragic emotion to the stage); third, a generic principle that distributes modes of imitation as a function of the dignity of their subjects; fourth, criteria for judging whether fables are suitable or unsuitable for tragic or epic imitation. He thus defines the first elements of the system of representative decorum that will be systematized by the classical poetics of representation. He also founds the principle of the presence of speech that will form the frame of the poetics of representation by creating a harmony between the reality principle of fiction, which circumscribes a specific space-time, its particular regime of speech, and the inclusion of this speech in the rhetorical universe that conceives of speech in the assembly or tribunal as social action.

We can then understand how, at the moment when this edifice of representation gave way, the Romantic poetics of universal writing that proclaimed its downfall should suddenly be confronted with the other disturbance, hidden behind the regulation of fiction: the indissolubly poetic and political disturbance of mute and loquacious speech. We can understand how, in the ruins of the Aristotelian system, Romantic poetics encounters the old Platonic question, and why the occasion of this encounter should be the confrontation between tales of the fate of proletarians seized upon by the wanderings of the letter and the *topoi* or modes of enunciation that have accompanied and

allegorized novelistic writing. In fact, it is the antgeneric genre of the novel that has carried the powers of the mute and loquacious letter ever since Antiquity. It has not only thrown together princes, merchants, and pimps, realistic scenes from daily life and tales of magic and scattered its stories here and there without knowing for whom they were or were not suitable. The novel also consecrated the mode of wandering enunciation that sometimes entirely hides its father's voice and sometimes imposes it so completely that it crowds out the actual story. The novel brings about the downfall of any stable economy of fictional enunciation and submits it to the anarchy of writing. It is only natural that its essential hero should be a reader of novels who takes them for truth, not because his imagination is diseased but because the novel is itself the disease of the imagination, the abolition of any reality principle for fiction by the adventures of the wandering letter.

This abolition is at the heart of Don Quixote's "folly." His folly is precisely his refusal of the distinctions that everyone else seems to accept: Master Peter and his puppets, whose adventures delight the spectators who have entered into the specific time-space of the spectacle and who know that the princess's mishaps and the Moor's brutalities are just for laughs; the innkeeper who admits the charm he finds in reading chivalric romances while the reapers are resting but knows that there are no more knights-errant; and the priest who agrees that it can be useful to read good books. Don Quixote responds by persisting in his refusal to distinguish among all the books running around the world with royal printing licenses and separate those that can be considered true from those reputed to be false. The extravagance of the Knight of the Sorrowful Figure is that of an "imitation" without example: not the imitation of glory, villainy, courage, or fear called for by the genres of representation, but the imitation of the book as such, the simple reduplication of writing's equality. This imitation is precisely what makes the principle of literariness—the principle of the availability of the written letter—effective and that muddles any distribution of speech among bodies that legitimately speak and are spoken of. Don Quixote is the hero of the literariness that has, as if in advance and clandestinely, sapped the system of legitimate imitation, the system of representation, even before the poetics of the incarnate Word exploded its theater. But this destruction itself occurs only because it saps, in advance and by parody, the principle of incarnation, of speech made flesh, that the new poetics was to set in opposition to the principle of representation.

The truth of the writing that dethroned the monarchical scene of speech was not incarnation but its undoing: the "muteness" of the wandering letter. It was

in vain that men of letters and conciliatory Christians like Huet broadened the domain of legitimate imitation to make room for novelistic fabulation. In vain did they bring the “Oriental” fancy of novelistic adventures and the figures and parables of the Book of Life together in the great kingdom of tropes. The novel had already broken the frame of this “fancy” in which it was to be included in order to identify the arbitrariness of its turns and detours with the profusion of living speech and spirit. The knight-errant of writing had already cut off the path leading from the stone saints reading the book of life on the tympanum of Cologne cathedral to the poet of *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The poetics of representation should have been succeeded by the poetry that is a world, the poetry of “everything speaks,” of speech already present in all mute things. But this great poetry steps forth shadowed by its opposite, the mute speech that only becomes incarnate in order to sap any body of speech, any consistency for the Book of Life or the poetic world. The art of incarnation is also the art of its undoing. This paradox was at the heart of the Hegelian definition of “Romantic” art: the incarnation of the idea in the people, the *epos*, and stone was in the past tense. This incarnation defined the classicism of art as an “aesthetic religion,” that is, art or religion before the Christian incarnation. Christian incarnation threw that other incarnation into the past. It created an infinite distance between the idea and its artistic presentation, between the power of subjectivity and the form of sensuous manifestation. The Romantic present, the Christian age of art, was the age of the withdrawal of incarnation, of the self-affirmation of art, that is, its self-destruction.

The same contradiction makes literature into the paradoxical name of an art that has no concept of its own and nonetheless lends itself to signifying all the absolutes of art. There is not, on the one hand, the banality of literature as merely a new name for belles-lettres, and on the other, speculations attempting to deny this banality by consecrating the act or the “experience” of writing. When Mallarmé asks, “Does something like Letters exist?” and answers that literature exists “in exception to everything,” this is neither *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism nor a pathetic experience of impossibility. “Banality” and “exceptionality” are conceptually joined. Literature exists as the neutralized name of a contradictory poetics, as the contradiction in action of the principle of the new poetics: the identification of the essence of poetry with the essence of language. This identification overthrows the poetics of representation at the cost of setting a knot of contradictions at the heart of the new poetics: the incarnate Word and the mute-loquacious letter. Literature’s foundation is what saps its concept, namely literariness. The scene of writing does not merely contrast the necessity

of the symbolic principle with the freedom of the principle of indifference. It is the concept of writing itself that is split and that becomes the scene for the war of writings. The “silence” of Mallarmé or Blanchot takes on an additional twist. What makes it possible is the war between two equally eloquent kinds of muteness: the mute speech that romantic poetics grants to all things and the mute letter of overly talkative writing.

# CHAPTER 7

## WRITING AT WAR

WE NEED to return to the tales of the perverted children of the people in order to grasp the principles of this war. Perhaps the most somber of these stories is Balzac's *The Country Parson*, whose fable, at first sight, is exemplarily Platonic. It tells of the mortal danger of writing and the intrinsic link between writing and democracy. The heroine Véronique is the daughter of a modest scrap-metal dealer from Limoges who became secretly wealthy during the Revolution by trading in nationalized property. One Sunday she finds a book called *Paul and Virginia* on an open-air bookstall. This book brings about a revolution in her relation to the world comparable to that caused by the ring on Gyges' finger. From that day on, the "veil which hitherto had covered nature" was torn aside. She begins to dream of chaste and sublime love-affairs while gazing at a little island in the river Vienne, which she transforms into Paul and Virginia's island. Later, rich and married to a banker, Véronique will seduce another child of labor, the workman Jean-François Tascheron, who, in order to run away with her, kills an old miser and buries his gold on the island. The young man will pay for his crime with his life, but never names his accomplice. Widowed, she passes the rest of her life doing penance for her crime by transforming into fertile fields the desolate countryside

where she has withdrawn. At the moment of her death, she makes a public confession of her guilt.

Presented in this way, the novel's plot coincides exactly with the demonstration of a metaphysical and political fable. The crime of the unfortunate Tascheron is, properly speaking, the crime of the book, the crime of the mute and overly talkative, dead and murderous letter, which speaks to those to whom it should not and turns souls of the race of iron away from their proper destiny. The clues that allow the police to catch Tascheron—an iron key that opened the miser's gate and the traces left in the mud by a pair of pumps—are, above all, allegorical emblems of the cause of the crime: the fatal misappropriation that put pumps on the feet of a being destined for the labor of iron. The real crime strictly illustrates the symbolic crime. The end of the story, when Véronique has become a philanthropic landowner who directs a massive irrigation project that fertilizes lands around the village of Montégnac, proposes the exact remedy: It is not the corrupting gold of the book that the children of the people need, but the practical means to ameliorate their condition through their labor, or, in Platonic terms, to "mind their own business."

Thus the story's subject and plot development seem carefully calibrated to its moral. But our summary is an optical illusion, for the novelist was, in fact, not able to compose the story so as to develop the moral strictly. Between the initial serial publication in *La Presse* and its appearance as a volume, the long and chaotic history of the book shows the impossibility of making the development of the plot coincide with the meaning and moral of the fable.<sup>1</sup> Balzac can neither work out a satisfactory narrative order that makes the plot of the real crime correspond with the fable of the symbolic crime, nor establish a satisfactory opposition between the speech that gives life and the letter that kills. Between the serial publication and the first edition in book form he had to invert the order of the parts. The serial version began with the story of the crime and trial, which itself was introduced by a strange episode showing the bishop of Limoges standing on the terrace of the episcopal garden, gazing mutely at an island in the middle of the Vienne, and only breaking his silence to say that the secret must be hidden there somewhere. The story then proceeded in reverse order, setting out from this gaze to reach the crime that is its object, or rather, its cause. We are presented with the circumstances of the crime and the episodes of the trial at the end of which the young man climbed the scaffold as a repentant Christian, but without having revealed the name of the mysterious woman of a higher class whose identity alone could explain his actions and his attitude. The causal void delimited in this way was filled in the second part, which recounted Véronique's life in chronological order, from the encounter with the fatal book through her

dreams of poetic islands and her prosaic bourgeois marriage to the point where her story joined up with that of the trial. The final part of the narrative then took on two tasks. In narrative terms, it had to make explicit the link, which had been inexplicable in the first part and all-too-evident in the second. Morally, its task was to make us feel the heroine's expiation of her guilt and thus the lesson of the story. The publication in book form inverts the order of the first two parts. This order is more logical in that it puts the cause (the symbolic crime) before the effect (the real crime) and its recognition (Véronique's confession). But this gain in philosophical logic—putting cause before effect—is a loss in terms of the narrative logic that should incarnate it. What good is a crime story where the cause is known before the crime takes place? We might as well imagine *Oedipus the King* beginning with Laios's oracle. Moreover, it makes the final recognition even more redundant. Still, Balzac considerably lengthened the final part, whose purpose is to give the moral of the fable and contrast the misdeeds of writing and democracy not only with the guilty woman's repentance but also with the antidote to the evil, namely the benefits of living speech, the moral and social order drawn from the Christian Book of Life. Balzac needs the final part of *The Country Parson* to show its eponymous hero at work, bringing living speech to the village that young Tascheron had left for his perdition and to which Véronique comes for her salvation. But the novel's moral ends up being as hard to work out as its narrative order. The preacher turns out to be more of an engineer. The great work of salvation that Parson Bonnet inspires in Véronique is the construction of a system of canals to control a waterfall and direct the waters toward a system of irrigation that will make the meadows around the village green and fertile. The greatest part of the end of the book is devoted to the description of these works, confided by Véronique to the direction of a graduate of the Polytechnical School eager for social action, a brother of the young engineers of the period who became priests of the industrial religion of Saint-Simonianism.

The meaning of this displacement requires careful consideration. It is not the replacement of the preaching of the Gospel by practical action. Rather, what is substituted is another mode of writing, another way to trace the lines that communicate the spirit of life to the humble people and give the community its soul. The lines traced by the canals, bringing prosperity to the village, are the text of Véronique's repentance, written on the land itself. "I have engraved my repentance in characters ineffaceable upon this wide land [...]. It is written everywhere in the fields grown green, in the growing township, in the mountain streams turned from their courses into the plain, once wild and barren, now fertile and productive."<sup>2</sup> The moral of the story is not a contrast between effective action and dangerous dreaming, but rather between two forms of writing: a

writing of life and a writing of death. The tracing of the lines of water, which lead the principle of life quite precisely, and for a single purpose, from its origin to its destination, stands in strict opposition to the tracing of the mute letter, whether that of *Paul and Virginia* or any other book like it, which drifts around the world haphazardly and goes to sleep on a fairground bookstall where any of the men or women whose business is not reading books might find it. Plato contrasted the trajectory of living speech with the evils done by writing. Christianity had set the dead letter in opposition to the spirit of life, the Word made flesh. But Balzac encounters a paradox at the very moment when he needs to represent the pastor of this living speech, the priest of the incarnate Word: no living speech responds to the evils wrought by writing. The power of the two priests, the bishop and the parson, to whom he confides Véronique's soul and his fable's meaning, is not the power of men of living speech. It is not that of sacred eloquence or the text of the gospel. The bishop's power is that of a Seer, a "specialist" as he is called in *Louis Lambert*: In addition to the pastoral power to read the secret of souls, he has the Swedenborgian power to pierce through the material appearance of the sensuous world and read its spiritual meaning. It was this power he exercised in the incomprehensible scene that opened the novel and that Balzac was obliged to move: His gaze fixed on the island, he read, by anticipation and without expounding the reasons, the hidden secret of a story entirely unknown to us. This spiritual gaze, situated at the beginning of the story, illustrates exactly the specialist's abilities: to see each thing in relation to its origin and its end. It is directed right away at the "spiritual" cause of the crime: the island as the "scene" of the crime, as an allegory of writing's baleful influence, the island of the book. But the Seer's privilege can clearly only be exercised to the detriment of the fiction. By pointing to the cause of the crime and the signification of the fable, it short-circuits the development of the plot. Or rather, it would short-circuit were it not for the fact that it remains mute. Faced with the crime of the mute-loquacious letter, the Seer's gaze is in turn condemned to be either mute or too talkative. If it speaks it destroys the interest of the plot. If it keeps silent, it removes the moral from the fable.

This dilemma is not merely a matter of fictional expedience; it concerns the status of the "Seer" himself. The Seer neither writes nor speaks. He can set no living speech in opposition to the evils of writing. The fable of *Louis Lambert* had already shown the Seer condemned to a mute madness. Here, in an exemplary way, the becoming-flesh of the book and the becoming-spiritual of matter have already been taken from him by the heroine who has made these ways of salvation into the means of her perversion. Véronique, in her wisdom, has taken on the folly of Don Quixote, who lent his body to the truth of the book, as well as

that of Louis Lambert, who had made for himself a body like unto his soul. The trajectory of the orphaned letter has already mocked and sapped the work of the speech of life. The speech of Scripture itself becomes suspect as well. The bits and pieces of the catechism that a nun had taught Véronique were already too dangerous, the novelist tells us, even before a well-meaning priest authorized the reading of *Paul and Virginia*.

This is also why Parson Bonnet will not edify the village with speech but with the works of an engineer. No speech—only another writing—can remedy the democratic evil of writing. But this writing has special characters. It is, on the one hand, an unwritten writing, without words, saved by its muteness from the duality of writing. On the other hand, however, it is a more-than-written writing, one that is not confided to ephemeral breath or fragile paper. It is drawn on the earth itself, engraved in the hard materiality of things. The fiction of a repentance that is written in the lines of fertilizing water is in fact a transposition for the benefit of Christian orthodoxy and the patriarchal social order of the scandalous linguistic and political utopia of Saint-Simonianism. It was the engineer-priests of this “new Christianity” who translated the Romantic poetics of speech present on the surface of mute things and of the equivalence between the language of science and that of communal mysticism into the terms of social and technical engineering. It was they who gave the last and most radical solution to a century’s worth of speculation about the language of deaf-mutes, the “true Homer,” and the poetic wisdom of ancient hieroglyphs: they took ship for Egypt in order to inscribe on the land itself, in canals and railroad lines, the book of life and the communal poem, of which ancient hieroglyphs were merely the shadow. “In Egypt we will not decipher the old hieroglyphs of past glory; we will engrave the signs of future prosperity upon the land.” “Who else can represent their political principles with a geography map?”<sup>3</sup> Thus “communication” between souls is literalized as waterways and railways. The poetics of writing on the surface of things has become, among the engineers of railways and souls, a “politics.” The critique of mute writing has thus come full circle, following the path of another muteness, an unwritten and more-than-written writing, to the old Platonic idea of the community as the true poem.

The story of *The Village Parson* thus gives us much more than an allegory of the misdeeds of the mute-loquacious letter in the new democratic age. It confronts us with literature’s paradoxical relation with its condition, literariness. What matters more than the fable is the novelist’s inability to make a proper plot out of it, like that of the moralist to draw the lesson. For the lesson to be drawn from Parson Bonnet’s methods is largely that of the Saint-Simonians, which says, “Enough words. Enough *flatus vocis* and paper entities. It is not

words, however edifying they may be, that we need to cure social misfortune, the misfortune provoked by words. The book of life must now be written in the works of engineers and organizers.” But how could the novelist make this conclusion his own without declaring a contradiction with his work? For whom does the novelist write other than the faceless, illegitimate public that reads serials in cheap newspapers, this assembly of “a certain number of young men and women” that Voltaire called into question? It is the readers of novels to whom he is showing that the misfortune of his heroes and heroines consists entirely in reading novels; he even shows that the most moral of novels would not be able to improve the situation—neither his writing nor any writing in words could.

The novelist writes for those who should not read him. This is not simply a performative contradiction, part of the domain of the pragmatics of communication. The democratic disease and literary performance have the same principle, namely the life of the mute-loquacious letter, the democratic letter that upsets any ordered relation between the order of discourse and the order of social conditions. At stake here is the status of the new writing itself, the idea of the novel as a new poetry that presents the poetic essence of language or the linguistic essence of poetry. The symbolic principle disrupts the narrative principle with which it would have to harmonize to allow the novel to exist. More fundamentally, it tears itself down as a poetic principle. For it situates its power outside of the writing of the book, in the bishop’s silent and spiritual gaze or the parson’s waterways. What slips away between the bishop’s silence and the parson’s industrialism is not only the moral of the fable but the “linguistic” consistency of Romantic poetics, the identification of the flesh of language and the poetic Word. The Seer’s silence does not only point out the impossibility of the fictional priest curing the evils of the book by his speech; it designates the constitutive contradiction of the new poetics. The old poetics was founded upon the continuity between seeing and saying. This was what, in Batteux’s analysis, allowed genius to be recognized. The poet’s powers of observation allowed him to compose an ideal image with traits drawn from nature; the internal enthusiasm this image evoked made possible a power of representation. This play between sight and statement made the art of poetry the norm of all modes of representation. Already Burke, Lessing, and Diderot had undermined the idea of the correspondence between the arts, the analogy between the poem and the statue, or between painting and theater. But with Romantic poetics the contradiction takes up a place at the heart of the poem itself. The poem’s language takes its norm from an absolute gaze, a non-mimetic gaze, which speech cannot fulfill. The prelate’s petrified gaze upon the island is proof of an “intransitivity” that has nothing to do with any formalist adoration of language’s

“self-referentiality.” It bears witness to the fact that poetic language no longer orders the visibility of thought according to a representative economy; its principle is now the doubling which leads each thing to present its meaning, every visibility its invisibility.

But this dissociation has a dual effect. On the one hand, the seer’s Sight functions as an anticipation of meaning, and thus authorizes the odd game of novelistic description that allows the reader to see without seeing. This game refutes in advance the criticisms leveled by the avant-gardes of the following century against the platitudes of realism. We can grant Breton that we never enter the room with Raskolnikov, however minutely Dostoevsky describes it.<sup>4</sup> Nor do we see the buttons on old man Grandet’s jacket, Charles Bovary’s cap, or the flowers of the Paradou. But this “failure” of realism is also the condition of the novel’s success. The power that makes it the Romantic and indeed modern genre *par excellence* is indeed the power described by Burke of words that affect without showing. Its problem does not concern the boring platitudes of vision. “Realism” is entirely built upon the gap that separates “Sight” from vision, upon the possibility of seeing without seeing. The problem is located within “Sight” itself, which is a power of seeing that is no longer in the service of representation, but affirms itself for its own sake and blocks the narrative logic and the moral of the fable. The symbolic principle then turns on itself: the symbol that makes everything speak, that puts meaning everywhere, now withholds this meaning in its body and no longer transmits it to the story. It becomes an “image” in the sense Blanchot gives the term: an image that does not show, a language that has become unavailable, an interiority turned inside out. The fable of *The Country Parson* allows us to understand that it is not an indifference to the meaning conveyed that constitutes this “image” as the heart of literary speech. Balzac’s tale is certainly not blocked by any lack of concern on the author’s part with the message. On the contrary it is the excess of meaning that sets the image blocking the path of the story. It is the reversal of a poetics that attempted to assimilate the anti-representative principle to a poetics of the incarnation of the Word.

The language of vision will not become flesh. But the “language of things” to which the power of speech is then referred will never be anything but their muteness. The lack of visionary speech and the excess of incarnate speech undermine the idea of a poetics founded upon the “new gospel” of *Louis Lambert*: “Therefore, perhaps one day the converse of *Et verbum caro factum est* will become the epitome of a new Gospel, which will proclaim that the Flesh shall be made the Word and become the Utterance of God.”<sup>5</sup> The edifying story of *The Country Parson* disproves this prophecy. It marks the gap between the theology of writing and its poetics. The spirituality of the visionary poet has no language

of its own that would be different from the language of cheap newspapers. And the iron rails of Saint-Simonian communication are in the end the truth of the book of stone. This is why, in fact, there will come a time when the futurist automobile and the Soviet locomotive will be the poems of the new age or the new man, poems of a hyper-writing that protects the communal power from the wandering of the democratic letter. The utopian politics of steel will have snatched up for its own greater glory the power attached to the literary utopia of the poem of stone and the cathedral-work.

Balzac's fable, in its own way, anticipates this fate. The impossible arrangement of fable, plot, and moral is nothing other than the quartering of the scattered limbs of Romantic poetics. No doubt the plot of *The Country Parson* is particularly exposed to Borges's mocking of improbably psychology and poorly constructed plots in nineteenth-century novels, which he contrasts with the tightly bound together stories in Henry James or Bioy Casares. But the well-constructed fictions that he praises have a quite specific texture: They are fables of fiction, detective stories in which the secret is always the same because it is the fact of fiction itself, its way of constructing a secret, that is the last word. These fictions are demonstrations of the power of fiction. The opposition between representative logic and expressive logic is wiped out, as is the contradiction between the principles of expressive poetics: Since the story is the confabulation of the power of fables, it smoothly combines the symbolic principle with the principle of indifference. It escapes representational "reportage" without ever getting lost in the infinity or indeterminacy of the symbol. The gap—the "muteness"—that was at the heart of the unity between speech and fable posited by Vico is thereby removed. The symbol is the formula of fancy; the sensuous inner world is only the world of fabulation. The Aristotelian plot can be completely identified with Schlegel's "poetry of poetry," just as fictional convention can be identified with the treasury of the imagination and the virtuosity of the writer-magician with the impersonal fertility of fables. There is only one genre, the genre of the imaginary, upon whose infinite resources fabulating man draws for the use of his natural audience, fabulating man.

It is certainly tempting to set this unique genre of the fable and unique formula of the tale in opposition to the uncertainties and awkwardnesses of the novel—the way in which this antigeneric genre recounts without representing, describes without showing, and calls for a language of things that would imply its own disappearance. Borges's fictionalist relativism and the poetic absolutism of the surrealists, Valéry's disdain for narrative absurdity and Deleuze's attempt to reduce the confusion of novelistic plots to the magical formulas and mythical figures of folktales can all come together in opposition to the novel's

bastardy. Literature becomes homogeneous with the law of fabulation, that is, the law of mind.

But the novel resists this identification. It is the place where the contradiction between the old poetics and the new is aggravated by the contradiction internal to the new. But this is part of what makes it the essential genre of literature, the genre that draws life from the banging together of its principles. The fiction of *The Country Parson* arranges, in their necessary intertwining and their impossible coincidence, the Aristotelian requirements for dramatic complication and resolution, the democratic fable of mute writing and the scattered pieces of the new “poem,” which, to be adequate to its concept, ought to be written in the specific language, the foreign language, that is capable of stating the power of language inherent in all things. This “other writing” is condemned to be not the raw material of literature but its constitutive utopia. Its field is thus a battlefield where it constantly shuttles back and forth between the democracy of the mute-loquacious letter and the innumerable figures of hyper-writing, unwritten writing, more-than-written writing. The scene of fancy’s charms has become that of writings at war.



THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE WORK OF LITERATURE

# PART III



# CHAPTER 8

## THE BOOK IN STYLE

**T**HE AGE of literature is not only the age of war between forms of writing. It is also an age that attempts to conciliate this battle and create harmony between sight and speech, between the indifference of the subject and the necessity of the work of language, between the great writing of things and the mute-loquacious letter. The opening of *The Country Parson*, like the ending of *Louis Lambert*, stages the impossible coincidence of a gaze that sees and a speech that tells. The failure of this coincidence can be attributed to a failure to forge the instrument necessary for literature. Balzac's quandary as a novelist can be summed up by the judgment of a novelist of the following generation: Balzac did not know how to *write*. "What a man Balzac would have been, had he known how to write! But that was the only thing he lacked."<sup>1</sup> This judgment does not deny Balzac's greatness. On the contrary, it establishes a strict correlation between power and impotence: "An artist, after all, would not have done so much, would not have had that amplitude." Balzac is like his bishop: he is a seer, and Flaubert experiences precisely this visionary quality when reading *Louis Lambert*, where the fictional schoolboy from Vendôme lives in advance the quite real adolescence of the schoolboy from Rouen. He is a seer and therefore is not an artist. Not being an artist is not, in itself, a defect.

On the contrary, for Flaubert this is the mark of the great creative minds of the past: They were not artists. “What is prodigious about *Don Quixote* is the absence of art [...].”<sup>2</sup> Something entirely different, that is, from the virtuosity that the age of Sterne and Tieck or Jean-Paul admired and copied. The great masterworks are stupid, he says elsewhere, and the life and mind of the creators of the past were merely “the blind instruments of the appetite for the beautiful, God’s organs by means of which he demonstrated to himself his own existence.”<sup>3</sup> Cervantes’s novel, in short, now belongs to the classical *epos*. Only this time of the beautiful in which it was possible to be a poet without being an artist, this time of Schillerian “naïveté,” is a thing of the past. There is no longer an art that, like the Greece of Hegel’s epic, is the “bible of a people” in which the poeticity that is already immanent in an ethical world comes to flower. We are rather in the time of the “sentimental” or “romantic” separation, in the time when the gaze that seeks the Idea is disjoined from the gaze that one bears upon the prose of the world, when it is necessary to be an artist, that is, to *will* the poem, whereas the “classical” creators produced it as the very act of breathing in their world. The seer is thus separated from the writer and they must be reconciled in a new form. The novel “awaits its Homer,” awaits the one who will once more make the work into the manifestation of an “originally poetic milieu.” It awaits becoming the new form of the “epic poem” that is still possible on the condition that we are willing “to get rid of any intention to create one.”<sup>4</sup>

We can recognize here the exact disposition of Hegel’s dilemma: What is needed is an entirely intentional and willed poetry that would be the Romantic equivalent of classical poetic works, which however were only what they were on account of *not having been willed*, because the product of the artist’s intention could not be distinguished from the unconscious process of the work’s production. It was while working on *Madame Bovary*, which begins in a school much like that of *Louis Lambert* and moves into a countryside quite the opposite of that of *The Village Parson* or *The Country Doctor*, that Flaubert furnished his answer to Hegel’s dilemma. This answer, which passes by way of a response to Balzac’s dilemma, can be summarized in a single word: *style*. *Madame Bovary* will be a work written “in style” because style is the precise identity of writing and the gaze. Style should “pierce the Idea like a dagger,” as the bishop’s gaze penetrated Véronique’s secret and Louis Lambert the spiritual world hidden behind the world of the senses. But it should pierce it as a power of speech. The response to the double dilemma can then be formulated in the strict terms of a gamble on writing, a gamble on a writing that would produce the Romantic equivalent of the substantial poem in which the individual Homer wrote, as an individual, the “book of life” of a people and

an age of the world. This equivalent will be, to the contrary, a work without substance: no longer the work as cathedral, but the work as desert, the “book about nothing” that makes word and thought adhere to one another by the force of style alone.

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter; the closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result. I believe the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it, as it has developed from its beginnings, growing progressively more ethereal, from Egyptian pylons to Gothic lancets, from the 20,000-line Hindu poems to the effusions of Byron. Form, in becoming more skillful, becomes attenuated; it leaves behind all liturgy, rule, measure; the epic is discarded in favor of the novel, verse in favor of prose; there is no longer any orthodoxy, and form is as free as the will of its creator. This progressive shedding of materiality can be observed everywhere: governments have gone through similar evolution, from oriental despotisms to the socialisms of the future.

It is for this reason that there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things.<sup>5</sup>

This letter is “well known,” enough so that care is seldom taken to pay attention to the exact terms of the problem. What is proposed here is a sublation of the poetics of representation that also escapes from the dilemma in which Hegel had enclosed it. Hegel’s sublation should have gone beyond poetry into the prose of philosophy and science; otherwise it would fall back into the wanderings in which fantasy exhausts itself while trying to repoeticize the prosaic world. For Hegel, “the progressive shedding of materiality” had reached a point at which it meant the withdrawal of the material of art. Flaubert refuses this conclusion. The time of prose is the time of a new poetics. This new poetics, however, is not as simple as it first appears. For form as well as matter is at stake: The endpoint of its “liberation” is its suppression. Byron’s “effusions” are by no means the final realization of poetry. “Pure” form is not the free expression of a

subjectivity deciding arbitrarily upon its subject and its means of creation. Style is not the free fantasy of a caster (or breaker) of spells in the style of Novalis or Jean-Paul who immerses prosaic reality in the ether of poetry. It is “an absolute manner of seeing things.” This apparently banal formulation contains both a revolution and the contradiction of this revolution. In the first place, it overturns the core of the principle of representation: the articulation of the generic principle and the principle of decorum. Style is no longer what it was for Batteux and his contemporaries, namely the adaptation of ways of speaking to a genre and its characters (Balzac parodies this adaptation by having his rogues speak in slang, his Auvergnats in regional dialect, and his bankers with a German accent). It is neither the appropriation of discourse to character and situation, nor the system of ornamentation, tropes and figures of speech suitable to a genre. It is a “manner of seeing,” which means that it is the very conception of the idea—the conception that Batteux considered to be a stage preliminary to writing and Balzac a vision that left writing deficient. To write is to see, to become an eye, to put things into the pure medium of their vision, *that is*, in the pure medium of their idea. It is moreover an “absolute” manner of seeing. Flaubert insists upon a rigorous use of metaphor and catachresis. We must therefore grant these terms a strong and systematic meaning. An “absolute manner of seeing things” is in the first place a manner of seeing whose only relation to things is that of *seeing*, whose “idea” about them cannot be separated from “their” idea, that is, from the manifestation of the medium of their visibility. Style had appeared as a manifestation of free will that could annihilate all matter. But this sovereign freedom can immediately be identified with its contrary. An “absolute manner of seeing things” is not the possibility of selecting angles and lenses to magnify, decrease, deform or color things at will. On the contrary, it is a manner of seeing things as they are, in their “absoluteness.”

“Absolute” means not bound, freed. What have things been freed from in this “manner of seeing”? A precise answer is possible here: they have been freed from the modes of linkage proper to characters and their actions that defined the genres of representation and determined the “styles” appropriate to them. The system of decorum that governed representative fiction did not only concern the manner in which a princess, general, or shepherdess should express their feelings or respond to a situation. The system of decorum and verisimilitude itself rested on a determinate set of ideas about how a given situation should produce a given feeling, a feeling an action, and an action an effect. It rested upon an idea of what events and feelings are, what thinking and speaking, loving and acting subjects are, what causes make them act and what effects those causes produce. It rested, in short, upon a certain idea of nature. And it

is from that idea of nature that things have been freed in the absolutization of style. They are freed from the forms of presentation of phenomena and linkage between phenomena that define the world of representation. They have been freed from the nature that founds that world: from its mode of presenting individuals and linkages between them, from its modes of causality and inference: in short, from its entire regime of signification.

Absolute style is thus not the enchantment of sentences on their own account. We should not be fooled by the author's statement that he would like to "produce books which would entail only the writing of sentences [...], just as in order to live it is enough to breathe."<sup>6</sup> For the power of such sentences is precisely their breathing a certain "air." The air that *Madame Bovary*'s sentences should breathe had previously been the object of a voyage of initiation in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. The great tempter had been a very particular sort of devil, a Spinozist devil. Friedrich Schlegel, during the period of the *Atheneum*, had proposed to his friends that Spinoza's theory of knowledge should be recognized as "the beginning and end of all imagination," the philosophical principle underlying poetic realism. Flaubert certainly never read the "Dialogue on Poetry," and his version of Spinoza displays the rather caricatured features of Romantic pantheism. But he makes no mistake about what is essential. His "realism," that is, the "realist" version of Romantic poetics, is indeed founded upon the specifically Spinozist form of the "harmony of the ideal and the real."<sup>7</sup> In the central episode of the *Temptation*, the devil leads the hermit on a great chase through space. He makes him breathe the "air" of the great void in which it is possible to see things in their "absoluteness." This void is not nothingness. It begins at the point where it leaves all its attributes behind, or rather where it is no longer possible to separate attributes from substance, being from qualities, or determinations from the force of the indeterminate. The saint's metaphysical temptation provides the precise principles of the poetics of absolute style. This style is not the sovereignty of one who manipulates sentences and forms, the manifestation of an individual's freewill in the sense in which it is ordinarily understood. It is, on the contrary, a force of disindividualization. The power of the sentence is a capacity to manifest new forms of individuation: no longer the "characters" of representative poetics whose coherence Voltaire insisted upon, but also no longer the "figures" of expressive poetics, the figures of the word made flesh whose conversion from speech to stone or from stone to text had been traced by Hegel and Hugo. In opposition to the servant of the Word made flesh, the devil shows us the divinity of a world in which individuations are only the affections of substance, in which they no longer belong to individuals but are composed according to the chance dancing of the "clusters of atoms that

merge with one another, come apart, and reunite in a perpetual vibration.” The “absolute manner of seeing things” is the capacity to make this vibration manifest. It is identical with the experience of the loss—that is, the expansion—of individuality manifested by the “chance” encounters that the devil recalls to the hermit:

Often, with respect to nothing in particular, a drop of water, a shell, a hair,  
you stopped, immobile, your vision fixed and your heart open.

The object you contemplated seemed to impinge upon you all the more as you leaned over it, and bonds were established: you held tight to one another, touching one another by innumerable, subtle adhesions; then, from having looked too long you saw nothing; listening, you heard nothing, and in the end your mind lost every notion of the particularity that it had been so intensely focused on.<sup>8</sup>

The poem of prose is possible because the “prose of the world” is itself only the superficial order in which the force of greater disorder expresses itself. Prosaic reality has no need of being “repoeticized”; under an attentive gaze, it presents its own dissolution. The world dissolves on its own into particular sentences. The artist’s presence within his work, just like that of “God in nature,” consists in his dissemination. It consists in making himself the medium of this dissolution. Style is not a matter of sentences because it is primarily a matter of “conception.” There is no language proper to literature, only a syntax that is above all an order of vision, that is, a disorder of representation. The Romantic relationship between subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious, individual and collective, on whose nature Hegel based his opposition between the substantial poetics of the book of the people and the poetics of unconditioned fancy, is here concentrated in the relationship between style as a manner of seeing and a new regime of individuation. This is the point where the reference to Spinoza takes on an operative value. It provides the principle for a revolution in fiction, a reversal of the ontology and psychology proper to the representative system. In place of its types of individuals, mechanisms of passions, and concatenations of actions, absolute style sets forth the dance of atoms carried along in the great river of the infinite, the power of unbound perceptions and affections, of individuations in which individuals are lost, of the “immense boredom” that is the Idea itself. In fact the Idea is no longer the *model* of the representative system, it is the medium of vision, the becoming-impersonal in which the seer’s position coincides with that of the seen. Such an opposition between two poetics is precisely what a draft of *Madame Bovary* stages in the meeting of

Charles and Rodolphe, where the fictional superiority of the lover who knows how to handle himself over the husband who has lost everything is reversed as the failure of the old poetics in the face of the new. Rodolphe pretends not to hear the questions posed by the husband, who wants to hear the story of his meetings with Emma. He thinks it comical to see Charles blame a “fate” that he thinks he handled with grace. But his fatuousness is merely the naïveté of those who hold to the old poetics, much like the vanity of Homais before his mirror, repeating *cogito, ergo sum*.

For he understood nothing of that voracious love which throws itself upon things at random to assuage its hunger, that passion empty of pride, without human respect of conscience, plunging entire into the being which is loved, taking possession of his sentiments, palpitation with them and almost reaching the proportions of a pure idea through amplitude and impersonality.<sup>9</sup>

We can now see that “to pierce the Idea” means to make the force of the gaze and the sentence coincide with the great passivity of the pure Idea, with this “voraciousness” of a love that wants to appropriate its own dispossession. The “freedom” of the artistic will is this coincidence between the action of the artist, who has become a pure eye, and the passion that reaches “the proportions of a pure idea.” The equality of the becoming-impersonal of knowledge and the becoming-impersonal of passion defines the poetic “medium.” This medium is no longer the substantial Hegelian bond between the poet and the object of common belief. Nor is it the atmosphere of enchantment thrown over all of prosaic reality by the pure fancy of an absolute *I*. The artist’s “free will” is identical with the integral penetration into this passion that has collapsed into its object, into the infinity of these perceptions and affections, these combinations of atoms that make up “a” subject and “a” love. It is the identity of an *amor intellectualis Dei* and a passion whose radical “stupidity” renders it equal to the splendor of the pure Idea. This identity gives a new foundation to the indissociability of form and content required by Romantic poetics. But it does so only at the cost of a reversal of perspective. In fact, the opposition between Hegelian objectivism and the subjectivism of the poets and thinkers of the *Atheneum* group rested, in the final analysis, upon a common fundamental presupposition that assimilated this relation of immanence to the model of the word made flesh. Aesthetic ideality was the presence of meaning [*sens*] at the heart of the sensuous, of speech at the heart of muteness—and this was the case even in extreme forms. The massiveness of the pyramid, incapable of expressing divinity, or, on

the contrary, the irony that destroys any content could still be testimony to the word. The power of the idea was a power of incarnation. It was the presence of meaning shining forth in the heart of sensuous qualities. But when Flaubert's "free will" comes to be identified with the absolute dispossession of the subject the conception of the idea itself is turned inside out. The idea is properly speaking the equivalence of any determination with the force of the indeterminate; it is the becoming-meaningless of any meaning. Aesthetic ideality had been the adequation between the becoming-sensuous of meaning and the becoming-meaningful of sensuousness. It has now been inverted; it is now the adequation between a meaning that has become meaningless and a sensuousness that has become apathetic, a "hidden, infinite impassivity."<sup>10</sup> The classical "plasticity" of form, for Hegel, presupposed the ethical "substantiality" of the epic world, seen in opposition to the disjoined relation between idea and matter characteristic of the massiveness of Egyptian symbolism or the evanescence of Romantic irony. What Flaubert invents as a substitute for this lost Hellenism is an "Egyptian" Romanticism, a relation between the passivity of the Idea and the brilliance of the sentence that is precisely like the relation between the great emptiness, the great desert of Egypt and the hieratic nobility of postures or the brilliance of a jewel on the arm of a beggar in rags.<sup>11</sup>

The aesthetic reversal of "free will," its submission to the "pure Idea" of stupid passion thus accomplishes, with respect to Romantic poetics, the same reversal that philosophical idealism underwent when Schopenhauer inverted the meaning of the word "will" so that it no longer designated the autonomy of a subject seeking the accomplishment of its goals but rather the great indeterminate depth that subtends the world of representation, beneath the principle of reason. There are no grounds to speak about "influence" here. The author of the "book about nothing" does not know about the "Buddhist" philosopher, whose fame is still in the future. But the novelist's Spinozism—a Spinozism tinted by the Romantic pantheism of the 1830s and that in the following decade will take on the color of the Buddhist "cult of nothingness"—exactly corresponds to the Spinozism invoked by the philosopher in identifying aesthetic contemplation as a knowledge of the Idea with knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>12</sup> He carries out the same reversal of "intellectual intuition," which passes from the subjectivism of Fichte's *I=I* to the Spinozist objectivity of the intellectual love of God, at the cost of giving this God the figure of an absence and this love the figure of a passivity. The novelist accomplishes the same movement, not as the application of a borrowed philosophy, but as the only possible solution to the strict posing of the Romantic problem: how to make the novel the equivalent of the impossible epic, how to produce the modern substitute for

a lost Romantic classicism. The theoretical propositions of Flaubert's correspondence are by no means the approximate expression of an autodidact's Spinozism. They are a precise formulation of literature's metaphysics, the reversal that gives antirepresentative poetics a coherent foundation in the metaphysics of antirepresentation. This is the point at which the poetics of the "book of stone" turns into the poetics of the stone wall and the "Tibetan" desert. But this reversal of the relationship between meaning and sensuous manifestation is neither the experience of "unworking" as theorized by Blanchot, nor the "nihilist" turn of bourgeois progressivism to which Sartre assimilated it. By putting the identity of the thought and the pebble in the place of the identity of the poem and the cathedral, Flaubert does away with the gap between the poetics of literature and its theology. He gives a positive foundation to literature as the effectuation of a Romantic modernity freed from the dilemma of epic nostalgia versus the empty self-celebration of fancy.

The gap that is frequently invoked between his practice as a novelist and his consciousness as an artist thus does not exist. In a commentary on the moments of reverie in which Flaubert's narratives periodically freeze up, Genette spoke of "this sending back of discourse to its silent underside, which is, for us, today, the very essence of literature." But he argued that this sending back only showed itself in moments of silence that interrupt the classical narrative logic of the action with its characters, events, and feelings. Flaubert, that is, practiced our "literature" without understanding what he was doing. "His literary consciousness," for Genette, "was not and could not be at the level of his work and experience."<sup>13</sup> But this opposition between a straightforward logic of actions and moments of interruption does not hold. These moments—these fleeting compositions of autonomized affections and perceptions—in fact constitute the very texture of the characters' "feelings" and of the "events" that happen to them. Thus it is not a dreamlike suspension but a decisive acceleration of the action that is produced by the zones of "silence" that, in *Madame Bovary*, compose the meeting between Charles and Emma.

First they spoke of the patient, then of the weather, of the great cold, of the wolves that infested the fields at night. Mademoiselle Rouault did not at all like the country, especially now that she had to look after the farm almost alone. As the room was chilly, she shivered as she ate. This showed something of her full lips, that she had a habit of biting when silent. [...]

When Charles, after bidding farewell to old Rouault, returned to the room before leaving, he found her standing, her forehead against the window, looking into the garden, where the beanpoles had been knocked

down by the wind. She turned around. “Are you looking for something?” she asked.

“My riding crop, if you please,” he answered.

He began rummaging on the bed, behind the doors, under the chairs. It had fallen to the ground, between the sacks and the wall. Mademoiselle Emma saw it, and bent over the flour sacks. Charles out of politeness made a dash also, and as he stretched out his arm, at the same moment felt his breast brush against the back of the young girl bending beneath him. She drew herself up, scarlet, and looked at him over her shoulder as she handed him his riding crop.

Instead of returning to Bertaux in three days as he had promised, he went back the very next day [...].<sup>14</sup>

The novelist is entirely conscious of what he is doing here when he immerses statements and perceptions in a single regime of indetermination, sets Charles in his contemplation of Emma, herself absorbed in the contemplation of the overturned beanpoles, interrupts this contemplation with an unprompted question concerning a search that nothing has prepared, or suppresses the paragraph that described Charles’s return and instead shows us, without explanation, the effect of the brushing against one another of back and chest. He replaces the traditional motivations and manifestations of the passions with a love that is made of a pure combination of affects and percepts: bitten lips, looking out a window, bodies touching, eyes meeting, blushing. He puts in the place of the representative order of nature the great disorder or the superior order to which the overturned beanpoles testify here before Emma’s gaze, just as did, in the novelist’s eyes, his espaliers destroyed by hail.<sup>15</sup> Emma’s fixed regard does not interrupt the action; it establishes its core: the “hidden, infinite impassivity” that is the common ground of the characters’ “voracious passion” and the serene conception of the novel and its sentences. The novelist knows what he is doing in philosophical terms: replacing one order with another. He also knows what means he is using to accomplish this goal, the distortions of syntax that Proust and a few others enumerated: free indirect discourse used not to make one voice speak through another but to efface any trace of a voice, the imperfect tense used not as a temporal marker of the past but as a modal suspension of the difference between reality and content of consciousness, fluctuation of the anaphoric value of pronouns (“he began rummaging . . . it [*elle*] had fallen . . .”) or of the function of an “and” that isolates rather than coordinates. The way to produce the equivalent of the “stupid” masterworks of the geniuses of the past, to realize intentionally the identity of the intentional

and the unintentional, is this antisyntactical use of syntax that undoes its usual powers: the distinction between objective and subjective, the establishment of a causal order among actions and emotions, the subordination of the accessory to the principal. This is how the artist's "free will" can coincide with the absolute passivity of contemplation lost in its object. This is how the figure of Emma passively absorbed in meaninglessness of overturned beanpoles can become the equivalent of the Greek plastic figure animated by a collective consciousness of divinity.

There is thus no disjunction between the straight line of the story and the "literary" silences said to interrupt it. There is only one line, but it is within that line that the contradiction is played out. At every moment the line risks going astray and turning into authorial self-display or the platitude of the prose of the world. Not that the sentence is everything: Style exists entirely in the "conception of the subject," in the "thread" that should link the "pearls" of the necklace—or the fragments of Schlegel's garland. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* had been content to strew these pearls pell-mell. The task of the "conception of the subject" is to link them. But each sentence or each sequence of sentences puts this "conception" at risk and brings forth the contradiction that haunts it. For the conception is, in fact, two separate things. It is in the first place the classical arrangement of a dramatic action as it was theorized by the representative system. But it is also what undoes such an arrangement, namely the visionary power that imperceptibly lifts it up, sentence after sentence, in order to make us perceive, under the banal prose of social communication and ordinary narrative plotting, the poetic prose of the great order or great disorder, the music of unbound affections and perceptions, mixed together in the great indifferent flux of the Infinite. The "conception" is precisely the contradiction in action of these two poetics. This is why the term music is more than a metaphor here, and the famous Flaubertian formulations that call upon the sonority of the sentence to prove the truth of the idea are more than an aesthete's provocations.<sup>16</sup> They in fact reformulate the constitutive contradiction of literature, the contradiction that the "book about nothing" had claimed to surpass.

The project of style as a manner of seeing in toppling the economy of the representative system had been to suppress the contradiction and grant the subjectivity of novelistic writing to the objectivity of vision. But this harmony needs to prove itself in every sentence in the equivalence of narrative syntax and contemplative antisyntax. The straight line of the narrative is not cut by contemplative moments but rather composed of these moments; the representative narrative is constituted of atoms of antirepresentation. But antirepresentative art has a

name: music. Music, Schopenhauer said, is the direct expression of the “will.” Once again, there is no need to have read Schopenhauer; being a consistent Romantic artist is sufficient to discover this same logic in the work of style that accomplishes the unconditional artistic “will.” Flaubert’s “plastic” ideal would reconstitute epic objectivity on the basis of the dance of unbound atoms. But the dance itself cannot be figured; it can only be heard in the sentence’s music. This is the role of Flaubert’s infamous *“gueuloir.”* Style is entirely in the “conception.” But the writer forging his sentences complains constantly that he “cannot see” what he is writing. He therefore has to entrust the task of verifying the truth of this vision that cannot itself be seen to the sound of his sentence. The “vision” of the Balzacian “specialist” obstructed the composition of the novel. The “vision” of Flaubertian style sees itself as identical with the construction of the plot, but on the condition of becoming invisible, or becoming music. The “absolute manner of seeing” cannot be seen. It can only be heard as the music of the atoms of antirepresentation that compose the novel’s “story.” Style as a manner of seeing, having made representative logic disappear, must further render this disappearance imperceptible by becoming music: the art that speaks without speaking, that claims to speak without speaking. The beautiful plastic form that made the book about nothing comparable to a Greek statue is now identified with the muteness of music. But this muteness itself tends toward a limit where it is identified with the platitude of ordinary speech. When she emerges from her contemplation to ask the doctor what he is looking for—whereas we had no idea he was looking for anything—Mademoiselle Rouault brings a whole world of causality crashing down. But this collapse can only bring their love into existence if it vanishes into the platitude of an absolutely meaningless dialogue: “She turned around. ‘Are you looking for something?’ she asked. ‘My riding crop, if you please,’ he answered.” The dance of the atoms is nothing more than the music of a disappearance, the music of the double silence separating the platitude of a narrative statement (“She turned around”) from the contemplative moment preceding it (the spectacle of the overturned beans) and the minimal dialogue that follows.

The Hegelian dilemma reappears here in two ways. The new “plastic art” of the idea that was to provide the novel with the lost objectivity of the epic is dissolved in music, which for Hegel was the art of empty interiority, the art that assimilates its muteness—its incapacity to represent an idea figuratively—to an immediate expression of innermost subjectivity in the objectivity of sonorous manner. The objectivism of style meets the subjectivism of “humor” from the opposite direction: in both cases there is an infinite relation between the idea and its manifestation. Flaubert’s infinitization of art, however, no longer passes

by way of the self-exhibition denounced by Hegel. It rather becomes invisible and identifies with the most mute of mute writings. Absolute style thus enters into a new and much more radical relation of complicity with mute-loquacious writing. It is not by self-destruction, as was the case with Jean-Paul, but by self-fashioning that stylistic difference equates itself with the democracy of the wandering letter. The critics of his own age seem to have understood this better than Sartre. Sartre attributes the muteness and minerality of Flaubertian writing to the nihilist aristocratism of the sons of the bourgeoisie in the wake of 1848. Contemporary critics also took 1848 to mark a break, but what they saw coming to take the place of the great abandoned utopias was not the nihilist aesthete's "column of silence" but naked democracy, the reign of equality. This reign is emblematised by Emma's second-hand culture and her feverish desire for pleasure, but it is also realized in the equality of writing that grants all beings and all things an equal importance and a single language.<sup>17</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly called it a rock-breaker's style. He thereby linked the mineral theme not to an aesthete's aristocratism but to the repetition of forced labor, although he did not know that the novelist had used the same metaphor.<sup>18</sup>

But perhaps these critics too failed to perceive the specific link between absolute style and the democracy of mute-loquacious writing. If the exemplary characters of the "book in style" are heroes of democratic "equality," it is insofar as they incarnate the lost children of the letter. Emma Bovary is the sister of Véronique Graslin; both were disaffected from their social condition by reading *Paul and Virginia*. Bouvard and Pécuchet, for their part, radicalize the fable of Don Quixote by their very nature as copyists, beings destined to copying the letter alone who take on the transgressive project of incarnating its meaning. But Flaubert can no longer affirm his own art and mastery of the novelistic game at the expense of his characters as Cervantes, Sterne, and Jean-Paul did. He furthermore refuses to abdicate responsibility like Balzac by opposing a "true" writing of life to the novel's mere words. The labor of style is then to separate the mute-loquacious letter from itself, to silence its chatter so that the music of its muteness may resonate. What does it mean to "write mediocrity well" if not to allow us to hear in chatter the silence that doubles it? To write the scene of the Golden Lion in *Madame Bovary* well means writing the pointless chatter of the customers in its irredeemable stupidity, and simultaneously undoing, line by line, the links that make this nonsense pass as meaningful, transforming its nothingness into another nothingness. It means making the emptiness of the great desert of the Orient shine through its opacity, bringing forth the immense boredom that is at the heart of everything and that redeems everything. The book about nothing converts the stupidity of the world into the

stupidity of art. It imperceptibly lifts the great slack covering of language that speaks itself—the stupidity of the world—in order to bring to existence, like a single snag in its surface, the sentences of the book and the mutes lives of its characters, those “obscure souls, damp with melancholy” that another letter says are like provincial rear courtyards eaten away by moss. The loves of Charles and Emma are singular snags in the surface of stupidity, that is, of the common language that goes straight ahead and has already spoken for them. But only the void separates each of these snags from the common fabric that will have reabsorbed them when Emma will rest in the earth beneath Homais’ inscription and Charles’s “voracious passion” that nearly reached “the proportions of the pure Idea” will have disappeared into Rodolphe’s final judgment. But the novelist who gives them the chance to exist like a parenthesis of silence within Homais’s chatter must himself constantly erase the difference that gives them being and make their sentences—the sentences of great love and immense boredom—resemble those of ordinary stupidity. Muteness can only resonate under chatter when its silence has been reduplicated.

Thus the fate of the characters becomes that of writing itself. Line after line, style produces the difference of an emptiness into which it disappears. Its ultimate fulfillment is its radical suppression. At the end of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, the lost children of the book return to their copying. But what they write is not only anything whatsoever; it is also the underside of their effort. Having wanted to put into practice the science of their century, they end up recopying the encyclopedia of its stupidity and return the materials of their book to their meaningless dispersal. Having had to copy to bring them to life, the author must recopy them as the conclusion to and suppression of their autonomous existence. They undo their book and his as well. On their way they, of course, come upon the exemplary fable of literature, the fable of the book in pieces. But this fable has been radicalized and its radicality implicates the project of literature itself. In what would have been the eleventh chapter of the novel, Bouvard and Pécuchet buy the stocks of a bankrupt paper factory and copy out the tobacco wrappers, old newspapers, and lost letters they collect by chance. They fall upon the report of the doctor qualifying their madness as harmless and decide to copy it as well. In Flaubert’s manuscript the description of their “absurd” reaction gives a final reformulation of the Spinozist poetics and affirms its identity with the breaking of stones: “Let’s copy! The page must be filled. All things are equal: good and evil, farce and sublime, insignificant and characteristic, exaltation of statistics. There are only facts, phenomena. Final and eternal joy.” In returning to their writing desk, Bouvard and Pécuchet do not only annihilate their own escapade in the world of the

mute and overly loquacious letter; they definitively cancel the imperceptible difference that style traced in each sentence between the letter's chatter and its muteness. The writer becomes the copyist of a copyist who himself copies the discourse of stupidity from which he wanted to escape. The absolute manner of seeing gives the final word to this stupidity, to the prose of the world that it had indiscernibly transfigured.

# CHAPTER 9

## THE WRITING OF THE IDEA

THE “WRITING” that responded to the aporias of Romantic poetics thus ends up canceling itself. “The style is astonishingly beautiful, but at times it’s rendered null, because of the imposing bareness,” was Mallarmé’s verdict on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.<sup>1</sup> What are we to think of this sumptuous nullity, this final reversal of the equivalence between splendor and the void? Mallarmé finds the subject an aberration, “which is strange in so powerful a artist.” But in what exactly does this aberration consist? It cannot consist only in the “platitude” of the subject, which Goncourt the naturalist and Barbey the anti-naturalist reproach Flaubert for in identical terms. “Naturalism” is not what is in question here. The vulgarities of *Pot Luck* and *Nana*, so exasperating to the aestheticizing taste of the symbolists but also to that of the naturalist Goncourt, were received with indulgence by Mallarmé. No doubt he thinks literature has a higher calling than evoking the silkiness of Nana’s skin for us to caress.<sup>2</sup> But the description of Nana’s boudoir, like that of the flowers of Le Paradou, the arrays of Les Halles, or the stained glass windows of *The Dream*, apply, in the “equality” of subjects, the identity of the principle of expression. Zola, who never posed the problem of a poetics of prose, still follows the symbolic principle that founded Romantic poetics; he makes things speak just as

*Notre-Dame de Paris* does. This principle of expressivity forms an unproblematic pairing with old-style narration, like the rhyme of the ideal for every reality. Naturalism allows novelistic form to be a compromise formation: a compromise between the contradictory principles of the new poetics, and thus also between the new and the old poetics, between the representative primacy of fiction and the anti-representative principle of expression. It is this felicitous accord between old-style narration and the Romantic “garland of fragments” that is summarized by the famous “slice of life.”<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the ambitions of the book about nothing, which are attached to Flaubert’s call for a poetics of prose, pose entirely different problems. The homogenous point of view created by the style claims to identify the indifference of the subject with the necessity of the expression. It thus reduces the musical doubling of the story to the point of indiscernibility at which it can no longer be distinguished from the prose of the world. Style and subject thus merge into a single principle of indifference that parasites and saps the fundamental principle of linguistic difference from within. Absolute style, affixing the word to the idea, finds its supreme refinement in the grey-on-grey where it becomes indistinguishable from its opposite: the “medium-sized breath of banality, scriptural” presented by the “simple maculation” of the open newspaper page. The aberration of the subject is the aberration of an absolutized prose that culminates in an identity between the prose of art and that of stupidity. In its extreme parody, the story of two dolts who—reading, writing, and experimenting—repeat all the stupidity of the century, cancels the linguistic reduplication that is the essence of poeticity. The poetics of the book about nothing identifies the two principles of Romantic poetics—the absolute character of style and the virtual presence of language in all things—and in the end cancels them both by bringing them down to the level of platitude that Mallarmé calls “universal reporting.”

The challenge posed by absolutized prose must be carefully weighed in order to understand the problem glimpsed in Mallarmé’s judgment. For the final identity of absolute style and the absence of style puts into question “literary specificity” at a level of radicality that condemns to an impasse any response that would attempt to counter with a literature free of any taint of compromise with common prose. Flaubert resolved the contradiction among literature’s principles by equating literature and its opposite. Reestablishing the distinction thus requires that the full set of contradictions that make literature feed upon its own impossibility be put back into question. The impossibility of Mallarmé’s Book is thus the result of neither the organization of an individual’s nerves, nor the experience of a metaphysical abyss linked to the notion of writing itself. It is the staging of the infinite whirligig of contradictions that is set in motion

whenever literature tries to stave off its prosaic loss and set clear limits to the “specificity” that makes it an exception to “universal reporting.”

Indeed, nothing is more remarkable than the gap between the immediate clarity of the responses to the “literary question” summarized by the name of symbolism and the infinite whirligig of contradictions set in motion as soon as one tries to make them into the principle of a systematic work. In one sense, everything is simple and the lesson of Monsieur Jourdan seems to apply with no problems. Poetry is whatever is not prose. In order to mark literary or poetic difference—that is, to identify the specificity of literature with the newly understood essence of poetry—it is enough to separate its subject and its language from prosaic business and the language of prose. Such is the “undeniable desire” of the time that Mallarmé takes it upon himself to interpret in a text first composed to serve as a Preface to René Ghil’s *Traité du verbe*. It is necessary, Mallarmé writes, “to distinguish two kinds of language according to their different attributes.” The “brute and immediate” state of speech corresponds to the tasks of telling, teaching, and describing, the functions of exact communication and exchange that take the final goal of the linguistic sign to be the pure functionality of the monetary sign. For the essential state is reserved “the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance [...] so that there emerges, in the absence of the cumbersomeness of a near or concrete reminder, the pure notion.”<sup>4</sup>

The literary principle must be made coherent as the principle of an exception to language as an exchange of information, goods, and services, so as to give poetry “a doctrine as well as a country.”<sup>5</sup> Flaubert’s religion of style was in the image of his tutelary saints, the saints of the desert: Anthony the hermit and John Chrysostom the preacher. It has a doctrine but not a country. Worse still, its doctrine forbids it to have a country of its own. Let me one day find my subject, said he, and you will see what song I can sing. In the meantime he worked upon the foreign soil of reality; he practiced scales, with lead weights on his phalanges. But the principle of indifference to which he bound the ideality of absolute style condemned him to never find “his” subject, to in the end find as the “highpoint of art” nothing but the copy of the copy of two dolts. For literature to exist it must be given its own land, a reality adequate to its language, a world whose sensuous forms correspond to the forms drawn by a language that is only concerned “with itself,” that is, which is only concerned with the reflection of essential forms and their relations. In taking the side of the philosophical dualism of will and representation, the poetics of antirepresentation exiled itself from any country of its own. Symbolism attempts to free this critique of representation from the prose of the Schopenhauerian “will” that wants nothing,

from the irredeemable muteness of things and desires. It transforms it into a critique of the prose of the world, a critique of the belief in the objectivity of the real upon which are constructed the language of commerce, naturalist prose, and the mirrors that the representative theater offers to the ladies and gentlemen who come to watch it. The writings of Albert Mockel and Teodor de Wyzewa and other theoreticians of the *Revue indépendante* or the *Revue wagnérienne*, the *Mercure de France* or the *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* proclaim this reversal of Schopenhauerianism: once more Spirit is enthroned on the ruins of an objective reality that is reduced to its true status as illusion and reflection.<sup>6</sup> “Spirit” can take on a number of philosophical figures and legitimate a variety of artistic practices. It can be a pure Fichtean I or a Hegelian absolute Self. It can be a soul that communicates with other souls through sensuous forms reduced to the Berkeleyan status of mere signs. It can be an impersonal spiritual universe that knows itself through individuals or makes their song into a particular verse of one of humanity’s great collective poems.

This spirit can found an artificialist poetics of calculated effects on the model of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,” or an essentialist poetics of the discovery of the essential rhythm of the world; a communication of souls in a sensuous inner world following Novalis or a “scientific” practice of “verbal instrumentation” like the one René Ghil drew from Helmholtzian physiology and tried to reconcile with a religion of humanity derived from Auguste Comte; a song that uses the flexible line of free verse to express the singular melody of a soul, or the song of a people in the manner of Wagnerian legend. But, as the letters that testify to Mallarmé’s famous crisis attest, the affirmation of absolute spirit and the encounter with nothingness, the knowledge of the nothingness of the great idealities and the will to display the resplendency of their glorious illusions lead to the same conclusion: if the spirit is only a dream, this dream can still be sung as the essential splendor of every reality. The incompatible philosophies of Berkeley and Hegel, Fichte and Schopenhauer, or Vico and Swedenborg can all be considered as variants of a single fundamental text of idealism, whose authorship by right belongs to the eclectic Schelling. The ecumenical idealism of the symbolists quite naturally takes its founding text from the following lines from the System of Transcendental Idealism, which were already the Schlegel brothers’ bible:

What we call nature is a poem that lies hidden in a mysterious and marvelous script. Yet if the riddle could reveal itself, we would recognize in it the Odyssey of the spirit which, in a strange delusion, seeking itself, flees itself; for the land of phantasy toward which we aspire gleams through the

world of sense only as through a half-transparent mist, only as a meaning does through words. When a great painting comes into being it is as though the invisible curtain that separates the real from the ideal world is raised; it is merely the opening through which the characters and the places of the world of fantasy, which shimmer only imperfectly through the real world, fully come upon the stage.<sup>7</sup>

This text is quite naturally recalled in Jean Thorel's article on "Les romantiques allemands et les symbolistes français,"<sup>8</sup> and Mockel's entire *Esthétique du symbolisme* can be considered as an extended commentary on it. A single fundamental formulation grounds the identity between the doctrine of literature and the country of poetry. Symbolism is a fundamentalist Romanticism, or a Romantic fundamentalism. This is why it crosses the borders that Schelling maintained. The historical Romanticism expressed by Schelling remained a doctrine structured by duality. It took the alienation of the spirit outside itself invoked in this text seriously: an unconscious sojourn of the spirit in nature; the union of consciousness and the unconscious in art where the spirit makes itself exterior to itself. To think of art as the coming together of this presence and this absence, Romanticism melded two conceptions of spirit: spirit in the classical sense as action, mind that gives form to matter; spirit in the romantic sense as the medium of communication of meaning. Thus sculptural form, as symbolized after Winckelmann by Greek statuary, was more or less discretely married with the music of the sensuous inner world. Hugo's cathedral put forth a double nature as carved stone and open book, balance of architectural masses and garland of images. Thereby was also maintained the distinction of art and philosophy. "Nature," Schelling continues, "is no longer to the artist what it is to the philosopher, merely the ideal world appearing under unchanging limitations, or the imperfect reflection of a world that exists not outside but within him." Symbolism suppresses this gap, this "classical" element of the exteriority of matter that is also the principle of the distinction between art and philosophy and of duality in the conception of art itself. Thus the negation present in Schelling's text disappears in Thorel's "citation": "Nature," Thorel writes, "*is for the artist what it is for the philosopher*, the ideal world constantly appearing in the forms of fiction [...]."<sup>9</sup> The very uncertainty of symbolist philosophy contributes to erasing this distinction between poetry and philosophy. Whether nature is raw matter, leaving the essential reality of the idea to the spirit, the pure dream that spirit projects outside itself, or the pure mirror in which spirit reflects upon itself, the result is the same. The images of the external world can be assimilated to the words of a language. They are the scattered significations that the poem

of the spirit must arrange in sentences. It does so by applying its own syntax. It matters little what order it follows, whether it begins from the knowledge of this syntax or discovers its rules in the forms and rhythms of the spectacle of nature. It matters little whether this spirit knows itself to be the sole reality or knows itself and its constructions as “merely empty forms of matter.”<sup>10</sup> Singing “in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies” is the same thing as transcribing the rhythms of the Idea or the play written in a heavenly folio.

This is why the heart of Mallarmé’s problem is not the pathetic experience of the Absolute or the nothingness encountered when seeking the pure Idea. The symphony of sunsets and the alphabet of the stars can teach him the identity of being and non-being that pure thought had refused him. Nothingness can transform itself into a glorious simulacrum and literature can be the practice of this simulacrum that “project[s], to a great, forbidden, thunderous height, our conscious lack of what, up there, gleams.”<sup>11</sup> For the fold of the verse’s dark lace to retain the infinite, not so much is required: a knowledge of “the symphonic equation proper to the seasons,” the sense for a few analogies between their “ardors” and the “storms” of our passions, a “reverence for the twenty-fourletters” and a sense for their symmetries.<sup>12</sup> The foam upon the surf or the reflection of the setting sun, the drape of tresses, the fluttering of a fan or the neck of fleeting glassware can offer their random magnificence to the seal of the poetic act. It suffices to “compare aspects and count their number” and to arouse “the ambiguity of a few beautiful figures, at the intersections.” The poetic act negates the social futility—the chance—of the object, tresses or fan, while keeping hold of its essential aspect, the virtuality of the worldly gesture that its movement describes. It marks the unfolding process of appearance, the scansion of appearing and disappearing that reduces nature to its “symphonic equation,” that is, its idea. Reciprocally, the folding and unfolding of the tress or fan of words in which the poetic act negated the chance of its “subject” brings about the disappearance of the other chance, the one that links the poem to the “personality” of the feelings, ideas, and experiences of a given individual. Thus three forms of chance—that of language, the subject, and the author—are negated simultaneously. The contradictory principles of romantic poetics seem to be reconciled. The symbolic principle, which refers every empirical spectacle to the metaphor of an essential form, can indeed be identified with the principle of indifference, which discovers the heavens of the poetic idea in the glow of a chandelier, the pantomime at a fair, or the swish of a gown.

Thus the entire dramaturgy of the Romantic contradiction finds itself canceled in a “Schopenhauerianism” that has been reduced to the axiom according to which the world is my representation. “While seeking for the image of infinity

in things, the poet discovers its sign in himself.”<sup>13</sup> Whether it is all or nothing, spirit in either case is only concerned with itself. Its object is not distinct from its language. The forms of the world are the signs of a language and the “new” words that poetry assembles are forms of world. The symbol is no longer the sign of an alliance between heterogeneous realities, the operator of a translation between the world of matter and the world of spirit; it is rather “the signification of forms expressed by the forms themselves.”<sup>14</sup> Spirit speaks to spirit in the language of the spirit: a language that is one in its principle and multifarious in its powers. The language of the spirit is the discourse in which the idea expresses itself, the metaphor that makes manifest the correspondence between ideas and forms, the rhyme that bears witness to the harmony of the whole. “He intended all of his verses to be at once a plastic image, the expression of a thought, the statement of a feeling, and a philosophical symbol; it should further be a melody, as well as a fragment of the total melody of the poem.”<sup>15</sup>

Romanticism is thus relieved of its contradictions, liberated from matter’s resistance to form and from the dilemma of the conscious identification of consciousness and the unconscious. Signifying form and sensuous form are identified within a single language of the spirit, assuring the identity of the anti-representative principle and the antiprosaic principle. The literary “doctrine” is the center of a poetic “country”; it is simply the vital law of the spiritual world. But a question arises: does the suppression of the literary work’s contradiction not amount to the suppression of the work itself? In the last analysis, this reversal inherent in symbolist fundamentalism is the object of Mallarmé’s question, “Does something like Letters exist?” The plural, evocative of the belles lettres of yesteryear, allows the question to be posed in these terms: once poetry has emerged from the dual constraints of the strict measure of verse and the classical conventions of representation, does there exist a specific art of speech that would be something other than “the refinement, toward their most polished form of expression, of all notions, in all domains,”<sup>16</sup> in short that would be something other than the general form of the life of the spirit or of thought? For the spirit is not of itself a work. The symbolists and free-versifiers prided themselves on having imposed the pure ideality of the poem and the absolute freedom of the melody that constitutes each person’s soul. They did not see that this absolutization of poetry, this liberation from any material or formal constraint assimilated it once more to the abstractions of thought and the communication of sensations, that is, to the labor—whether ordinary or extraordinary—of the prose from which they wanted at all costs to differentiate their work.

“The idea of poetry is prose”: the paradox encapsulated in Benjamin’s formula is what symbolist purity sought in vain to avoid. But it is also the constitutive

paradox of literature. It was given theoretical expression by the fate that Hegel assigned to this “general art”: to lead art to a fulfillment that was also its suppression. It was given an empirical development by Hugo’s use of enjambment to both join and disjoin the two functions of the alexandrine as a sentence expressing a thought and a ritual measure of the poetic division of time. But poetry, as Hegel had warned, lives on their distinction. Giving thought its own temporality makes the work of poetry—the time of thought resisted and deferred—disappear. Beyond the immediate and obvious solutions that can be proposed, Mallarmé’s question about “something” like Letters uncovers the cutting edge of the question. Perhaps the rarity of the poem and the impossibility of the Book that are associated with his name are in the first place the translation of the rigorous experience of the logic that only allows literature to be coherent at the cost of its suppression in the form of absence of work that is called “the life of the spirit.” In this case the impossibility of the Book would not be the manifestation of a central impossibility of the concept of literature, but rather the impasse of the evergreen will to surpass the contradiction that makes literature exist by giving it a doctrine and a country of its own. The “absence of work” that Blanchot’s theorization sees as attached to the idea of literature itself, then, would not be the nocturnal experience of incapacity that is at the heart of language’s powers, but rather the effect of the attempt to make the literary principle coherent by identifying the antirepresentative principle and the antiprosaic principle. Alongside the indiscernibility of the work of literature and the stupidity of the world in which the coherence of Flaubert’s absolute style and book about nothing dissolved, we find another form of loss of the work in which its desire to distinguish itself from all prose and all matter leads it to become merely the life of the spirit. Here we find the most general form of the paradox: reduced to its specificity, literature vanishes into the life of the spirit, to which no work can be adequate.

Thus the shining simplicity of the general formula proposed for symbolist poetics by Mallarmé’s “Avant-dire” is bifurcated and the adequate relation between idea and speech turns into the chiasmus of music and letters. The essential state of speech appears as disjunct: Essential speech is both speech and music. For the “pure notion” to arise the poetic act must operate in a musical fashion. It must “transpose a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance.” For the specificity of music is to make both the density of things and the representative organization of words disappear. Music alone proposes a language that is structurally pure of representation, in which representation vanishes in the face of vibration, that is, of the spiritualization of matter. It is “near the Idea” because it is the tomb of the image and of reporting. But this privilege

has a strict counterpart. Music is the tomb of the image to the precise extent that it is also the tomb of speech that names, informs, orders, and celebrates. It goes beyond chatter only because it goes beyond speech itself. Music is mute. But this fact allows it to claim to signify everything—to signify everything on the symbolist model of signification, that is, by suggestion, by analogy between its tones and rhythms, its speeding up and slowing down, its blaring brass or dreamy woodwinds and strings, and the essential aspects of the world and their correspondences in the intimate theater of the spirit. Music claims to dismiss the mute and loquacious letter in order to enthrone the pure kingdom of spirit become sensuous. But if it can promise this castle of purity without risk, it is because it identifies ideality with the simple absence of speech. Like the mute painting of the dead letter, it is dispensed from having to explain itself, and this allows it to trundle it so-called speech wherever it wants. Mute music becomes loquacious music, the hurly-burly of naked sounds that say nothing, explain nothing, and pass all the more easily as the originary poem of the community.

Music's privilege is thus immediately contested. The musical spiritualization of the world must occur “according to the play of language, however.” The “musical” task of transforming the spectacle of things into pure notions ends up being the responsibility of “intellectual” speech. This necessity only radicalizes the problem, however. We are doubtless capable of imaging poetic equivalencies for the techniques of musical “signification”: the mobilization of words on account of their inequalities, the balancing of motifs, the grouping of harmonies around the melodic line, the differentiation of *tempi* and dynamics, the alternation of triumphal blasts and closed folds. But the intellectual speech that had been opposed to the “the fall of mere sound” now finds itself identified with the pure materiality of an instrument, with the inert ivory of the keyboard: music is “the beyond, which is magically produced by certain dispositions of the word; where the word, moreover, is merely a means of material communication with the reader, like the notes of the piano.”<sup>7</sup> The intellectual instrument of speech only regains its rights over music by imitating its muteness. As for music, it only grants speech a role as the “instrument” of the idea in order to become the very mode in which the idea appears and, in the end, the name of the idea itself. The end of the “play of language” itself is that “there arises, musically” the pure notion of the flower in its difference from all known blooms. And what should result from the privileged affirmed to the “intellectual word at its height [...] as the totality of relations existing in everything” is simply called “Music.”<sup>8</sup>

Letters exist only as music *and* Letters. This disjunction is something quite different than the difference between the means proper to two rival arts that could be combined. It is rather the disjunction within the idea of the art

of speech itself, the disjunction of the idea of art within the idea of the art of speech. For music is not simply an art; it is an idea of art: not one idea among others, but the new idea of art and of the correspondence between the arts that systematizes antirepresentative poetics. It is the idea that comes to occupy precisely the place formerly held by poetry, which was both a representative art and the general idea of art. Indeed, all the arts represented; they “imitated” in the mode of poetic *mimesis*. They imitated the fundamental modes of poetic representation—discourse and narration—while pursuing the same ends—to teach and to move, to please and convince. Abbé Batteux’s great enterprise of the “*beaux-arts* reduced to a single principle” had systematized this relation. Painting and music, dance and sculpture could be compared to one another as genres of poetry. Mallarmé obstinately picks over the ruins of Batteux’s edifice—the interstices of theatrical representation, the dabs of painting, the shimmers of the orchestra, the vanishing figures of the dance, the mute language of pantomime, or the incidents of popular entertainments—searching for the terms of a non-representative grammar of the arts that would give the general art of poetry the equivalent of what *mimesis* had formerly implied, that is, a concordance between the arts founded on a new coincidence between the space of language and the space of things.

But there can no longer be a single mode of this coincidence. Romantic poetics had first put forward, in opposition to the representative concordance, symbolic analogy: the unity of the manifestations of art as modes of language. The problem here is that language was precisely in the process of withdrawing from this unifying function. At the very moment where poeticity was being affirmed as the original mode of language, the science of language abandoned reveries about origins and freed the space of language from its intrication with the space of things.<sup>19</sup> The new idea of art as language, borrowed from what used to be called “philology,” made the language of art into a mode of expression of thought outside itself, a past and surpassed mode of thought. The transformation of representation into expression and of representative correspondence into hermeneutic analogy could never give literature an unambiguous theoretical status. In fact it served to do something quite different, namely to inscribe the fate of art within that of thought. This is how, in Hegel’s philosophy, the correspondence of arts turned into the sequence of their modes, the transformation from the most material to the most spiritual forms of language. The “general” art of poetry, conveniently placed at the end of the route, was the culmination of the transformation of stone-thought into pure thought, the return of thought to its true home. The resulting paradox is well known: The “new” idea of poetry made it into a thing of the past and barred literature’s way. But along the way

this path for thinking about art encountered another problem. The art of music had to be crossed over before arriving at poetry. Hegel did it at full gallop, on account, he said, of his incompetence. But the true, more profound, and unacknowledged reason was that, under the feet of symbolic thought on the way toward pure thought, a chasm was about to open up in the form of another end of art: the imageless and thoughtless ideality of music with its direct communication between artist and listener through the medium of a vanishing materiality. In opposition to the hermeneutic play of sign and symbol, of the hieroglyph and its deciphering, music presented a different use of signs. The mathematical calculation of the “abstract understanding” became sensuous intuition of the ineffable. Music is the art of time, of Kant’s “inner sense,” the art that no longer draws forms resistant to meaning in space and that no longer uses words to express thoughts that lack sensuous form. It is thus the art that offers its technique to the realization of the Romantic dream of a ”sensuous inner world” but that also offers its concept to the very idea of art. Thus another end of art comes to be proposed, an *artistic* end of art, which makes sensuous forms fluid and the calculations of thought sensuous. Instead of reducing the sensuous ideality of art to the conscious thought of self, music dissolves it in the institution of a medium of ideality in which soul speaks to soul in the soul’s own language through the conversion of the mute signs of mathematics into sensuous intuitions. It thus presents its absence of meaning as the supreme incarnation of spiritual meaning in sensuous matter.<sup>20</sup>

Hegel’s authoritarian solution held off this fate at the price of freezing the fate of art itself. The will to hold off in turn this freezing, to build a future for literature, naturally brings the problem back to the fore. Whoever accepts neither the naturalist compromise between the old and new poetics nor the identification of poetry with prose must inevitably come upon music as the idea of antirepresentation, the idea of art and of the concordance of the arts in the postrepresentative age. Music is called upon to “sweep away” the dust of representation in a “thorough washing of the Temple.” But, in the image of the God-become-man who chased the money changers from the temple, it only frees us from the old law and the old covenant to subject us to the new covenant, to the speechless law of spirit and interiority. Henceforth poetry belongs to music; it is a genre of the art whose idea is music. This is the core of symbolism as a Romantic fundamentalism: there are no more symbols; there is now only the spiritual world, a single music of the spirit distributed amongst the rhythm of forms and the melodies of souls. Mallarmé falls under the sway of this logic but also rebels against it. He is no more willing than Hegel to admit that music’s lack of meaning—its inability to speak—make it the supreme realization of the spiritual world. This

is what is at stake in the “repatriation” of orchestral renderings to literature: not a direct transposition of musical techniques into techniques of writing, but the reversal of the destiny that gives liberated literature a new master, music-spirit, that separates it from itself and condemns it to insignificance. Art only finds its unity in the “spiritual” medium of music at the cost of dissolving in a “volatile dispersal of the spirit.” The power of the word must be restored against this dissolution; even if it exposes literature to the illusions of representation, it is the only instrument that allows for the lucidity of thought. But this also means that the word requires its own space, the sensuous surface upon which the idea is inscribed. Music drowns art in a temporal pseudo-interiority. Literature reconquers itself by identifying the art proper to the idea with an art of space. This also means that it restores the idea “to itself” by giving it its primary materiality. In short, the idea must be rematerialized in order to regain its intellectual power.

But at this point the question shifts and another duality appears: There is not one but two spaces for the materialization of the idea. There is the space of representation in which it is drawn in sensuous figures, and the space of the page where it is identified with the ordinary flow of prose. Once the idea has been recovered, a choice must be made between the space of theatrical figures and that of the mute-loquacious letter. Here the whole problem of Mallarmé’s Book is sketched out. The project of the Book is much less concerned with the goal of transcribing the orphic secrets of the universe, or even the more modest one of linking the flowers of the poetic garland, than with the question of the materiality proper to the poem. In order to escape the musical “muteness” that had freed it from representative chatter, the poem needs to forge a new alliance with spatial materiality. On the one hand, this materiality can be that of the stage, the traditional site for the inscription of mimetic power. Spirit must sketch its own image—an image, not a representation. On the other hand, this materiality can be that of the book, the space of the mute-loquacious letter, the letter that cannot “defend itself,” that cannot draw the distinction between literature and the prose of the world. The impossible project of the book is therefore the unification of these two spaces, the constitution of an antirepresentative and antiprosaic theater proper to literature and of the space of the book as a mimetic space identical with the spacing of thought that has itself become sensuous.

This problem is obscured by some overly simple declarations by Mallarmé contrasting the “architectural and premeditated” Book with the album, which is only “a collection of chance inspirations, however wonderful.”<sup>21</sup> We need a clear view of the paradox implied by this proposition. In one sense, this proud declaration is an entirely banal statement about the organic character of the work, taken over by all the handbooks from Boileau, who himself took it Aristotle,

who in turn had found it in Plato. But this banality of the old poetics has in fact become entirely problematic. What can it mean to call a book “architectural” after Burke’s destruction of the poetic norm of the body’s geometrical proportions, or “premeditated” after Schelling’s definition of the essence of art as the identity of the conscious and the unconscious? The book-cathedral of Romantic poetics is not the book as architecture. It is an album of analogical images, a collection of tympanums, capitals, and stained-glass windows. The problem of the whole can no longer be that of assembling the parts. For parts are assembled insofar as each is both complete as a part and in need of the whole to find its place. But the symbolist poem stands outside of this functionality in two ways. On the one hand, it is a whole on its own, a sufficient expression of the poetic function. On the other, it is incomplete in the sense that it is not a self-sufficient object. It is an argument, a hypothesis, a proposition of poetic space. Suggestion and symbol mean that there is a poem where there is a proposition for a play of aspects, for a system of harmony between the intimate theater and the spectacle of the world, but also where this play of harmony encounters another, where a reader “applies” his ingenuity to a blank page, where a spectator “juxtaposes” his inner theater with the spectacle on stage. The true location where the poem finds its place, the true totality in which it is inscribed, is the scene of its shared performance.

For the writing of the Idea is two things at once: it is both text and interpretation. The analogy the poem proposes between the theater of the self and the theater of the world must be interpreted and analogized in the poetic performance that is reading. The poem comes alive in the intimate theater or concert that the reader stages for himself in the ceremony of the thumb that holds back the page, the eye that dramatizes the relation between black and white, the voice that murmurs the text or hums the tune beneath it. The poetic act sketches out the stage that makes this juxtaposition and system of correspondences possible. In opposition to the old representative fiction, the new fiction is not a fabrication of characters offered for the audience’s recognition, but an arrangement of the artistic tools that establish a stage. Fiction is staging: an institution of the place and environment of fiction and a punctual demonstration of its powers. But this demonstration needs to culminate in another theater where the written signs or hieroglyphs traced by the dancer’s steps are reintegrated into the intimate theater of the spectator or reader. The poem cannot be separated from the creation of a shared poetic life. The “totality” in which it is inscribed is that of an always aleatory and momentary sharing. The poem’s space is theatrical performance. Thanks to the duality that constitutes it, this performance eludes both representative chatter and the nullity of the mirror image: it is the material

tracing of signs and the interpretation of those signs. The model for this duality is found on the ballet stage, where it institutes a privileged relation between writing and choreography. On stage, the illiterate ballerina is a sign tracing the signs of a writing that is “independent of any scriptural apparatus.” This evanescent material writing allows her body to materially inscribe the idea in a space. This purely material presentation, this plastic poem of the idea, triumphs over representation in its own theater. It is still necessary, however, that it be interpreted, that a poet-spectator lay “the flower of [his] poetic instinct” at the ballerina’s feet.<sup>22</sup> It is at that price alone that the mute writing of the dancer will trace, “like a Sign, which she is,” the poet’s dream, or that he will compose *his* poem with the illiterate’s mute hieroglyphs.

The space in which the poem becomes a totality is thus that of performance. Performance is always twofold: writing and interpretation of that writing. The space proper to thought turns out to be a twofold theater whose duality only re-stages the constitutive contradiction of the Romantic poem. The collaboration between poet and dancer provides a metaphor for the necessary and impossible conscious union of consciousness and the unconscious. “True” writing thus eludes itself. The material presentation of the poem is never more than the presentation of its emblem. What stands in opposition to “historical”—that is, representative—art is “emblematic” art.<sup>23</sup> But the parable of the dancer tells us something else as well: The poetic fact is the fact of emblematic doubling itself. In other words, the poem is not structurally bound to the art of writing. There is a poem wherever there is a correspondence between inner “types and correspondences” and those offered by the spectacle of forms. The poem is “Sight,” a “point of view”: the point of view of analogy. The dreamer who reads an astral drama in the spectacle of the standing bear putting his paws on the shoulders of a terrified clown is already composing a poem. A poem exists as soon as the relationship between writing and “seeing” is established. But, in fact, it is “Sight” that decides whether the forms of a spectacle in fact contain the mute signs of a writing. When we think about the “rarity” of Mallarmé’s poems we must keep in mind that it is the correlative of an abundance: if there are few poems it is because the poem is everywhere, and everywhere under the sign of the doubling between the tracing of the idea and the spiritual Sight.

The problem is thus not how to give the book of poems its “architecture,” but rather how to repatriate the space of performance within that of the book. For, in performance, the consistency of the poem continually fritters away into the life of the spirit: The life of the spirit that, ever since Vico, has been governed by the equivalence between the work and the emblem. The symbolist avant-gardes of 1890—like the futurist and surrealist avant-gardes of 1910 and 1920—constantly

perpetuated this equivalence, merely renewing the emblems: from the symbols of reverie to those of mechanical speed, from the poem of iron to the hieroglyphs of the unconscious or the song of the community of labor. The new poem only gets away from the platitudes of prose and representation in order to run into the perpetual metamorphoses of spirit incarnate in matter but reducing it to a volatile dispersal. Mallarmé never stopped struggling—or perhaps playing hide-and-seek—with this Protean spirit, always ready to appropriate the poetic materiality of the idea. More than communicating the orphic secrets of the universe—a task that occupied many of Mallarmé’s contemporaries—the project of the Book is to fix Spirit upon the page, to assure the materiality of the idea by identifying the space of performance with the space of the book.

The Book or its exemplary page must guarantee, once and for all, against the musical dissolution of the poem, the material objectivity of its idea. It must present the naked expression of thought or the “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea” analogized in the material disposition of words on the page. This performance of the Idea equates the space of the volume with the space-time of performance, which means that it also reduces to a single stage the twofold scene of performance that was both writing and interpretation, surface for material inscription and intimate theater of analogy. One single space must contain the performance of the idea tracing its steps on a surface and that of the spirit recognizing its own theater. But this identity of material and mental performance, of the book and living speech, of mind and body, still has a “spiritual” name. The symbol of symbols or the performance of performances is properly called a “sacrament.” This is precisely what is involved in the project of the Book. Each poetic performance was a singular elevation of the common glory: the chance of a “spiritual light” that harmonized with the glow of the sunset, the movement of a fan, the raising of a dancer’s skirt or the ephemeral figure traced by her steps. Each of them denied chance—the chance of the principle of indifference—and each allowed chance to reconstitute itself. For something other than the place of poetic performance to take place, literature would have to possess its proof, that is, the first institution of the sacrament that each poetic event repeats: the original identity of the spirit, its spatial projection, and its “repatriation” in the intimate theater. As the material space proper to the “intellectual word,” the Book is both the text and the execution of this first sacrament. It is the utopian identity of book and performance, of score and theater, consecrating the first elevation of the common greatness that each poetic performance repeats by chance.<sup>24</sup> It must be more than a book: It must be both the book and its execution; it must be the book that demonstrates itself, whose execution demonstrates its text and whose text demonstrates its execution. The disposition of lines on paper must

present both the body and the idea of its idea. It must sketch the very syntax of thought, of the forms and rhythms that render the space of thought appropriate to the music of the world and to the “totality of relations existing in everything.” The book or the essential page is in short the landscape of thought drawing its own inner space on the blank page. The writing of thought in its own language becomes the *mimesis* of thought that draws its own resemblance on a sheet of paper. It thus becomes the most radical form of the “true” writing, both more and less than written, whose idea has accompanied the critique of literary democracy ever since Plato. The story of *The Village Parson* showed novelistic writing caught between two figures of hyper-writing: less-than-written writing, the pure trajectory of breath represented by the Swedenborgian language of the spirit, and more-than-written writing, inscribed in the materiality of things, exemplified by the lines of the canals and railways of Saint-Simonian “new Christianity.” In the writing of Mallarmé’s Book/theater/service, these two figures of thought become breath and thought become matter come together. The two mute writings that accompany the battle of the poetics of the spirit against democratic literature identify with one another in the very heart of the poem, in the heart of this writing of an archipoem similar to the materiality “proper” to thought.

But this radical hyper-writing is also an extreme form of the *mimesis* that resolves the contradiction of symbolist poetics by reversing its principle. This poetics required “suggestion,” putting aside any copying of empirical flowers to call forth the flower of its pure idea. But for thought to be able to draw its inner space on the page of the *Coup de dés*, the “allegorical” or “emblematic” distance between sign and meaning had to be negated in order for meaning to be literatized, drawn on the pure space of the book. The poem’s visual disposition must take the principle of representation further than it had ever been taken before: the disposition of groups of words must visually imitate what the poem says, which it draws on paper in the shape of a sinking boat and a heavenly constellation. For

the rhythm of a sentence about an act or even an object has meaning only if it imitates them and, enacted on paper, when the Letters have taken over from the original etching, must convey in spite of everything some element of that act or that object [...]. Thus does literature produce its proof: no other reason to write on paper.<sup>25</sup>

But this typographical demonstration of literature is also the process of its nullification. What, ultimately, is the consecration that ought to separate chatter

from prose if not the coincidence of the sign of thought and spatial form, if not the taking to the extreme of the logic of the symbol that wants to be taken as both the sign of thought and its body, as a text to be interpreted and as the drawing of a form? According to Hegel, this ambition of the symbol to be both form and thought led it to be neither, to be merely the index of poetry's vain attempt to do transcend itself and become philosophy. And this may be the destiny of this paper ship: a story that negates itself and a form that disqualifies itself in order to identify with the pure outline of the idea, at the cost of dragging the idea down into their own insignificance, of once again identifying it with the letter and the paper whose contingency the poet wanted to negate once and for all, in order to demonstrate that literature exists.

# CHAPTER 10

## ARTIFICE, MADNESS, THE WORK

“**F**OR SOME forty years now literature has been dominated by the contrast between the gravity of the expression and the frivolity of the subject (a result of *Madame Bovary*).”<sup>1</sup> Proust drew up this inventory at the moment he was about to begin writing *Remembrance of Things Past*. Flaubert’s “frivolity” was the strict application of a poetics of the indifference of the subject and the absolute character of style, which obliged the novelist to mark, line by line, the imperceptible difference destined for a final erasure. There is another kind of frivolity, which made Mallarmé end up writing “visiting card” poems rather than the poem that would be the writing of the idea in its own space. There is the loss of absolute style in the dead letter to which the superb and quasi-null style of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* bears witness. And there is another loss, one confronted by Mallarmé, which dissolves the materiality proper to the poem in the “spirit.”

For the heart of literature and its contradiction is not the self-referentiality of language, the self-enclosed kingdom of the letter. It is the tension between the letter and its spirit. This tension begins with the collapse of the old poetico-rhetorical edifice of *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* to the single level of *elocutio*. This level is not that of formal play upon language but that of tropes. The trope is the difference

between language and itself, the shuttle between the space of words and the space of what they say. The new poetics began with Vico's project of destroying, once and for all, the old claims of a hidden wisdom in ancient poetry, the claim of an allegorical false bottom that Homer's partisans had argued against Plato and the philosophers, just as the philosophers of paganism would later argue it against the Christian gospel. Vico's response was that poems are not books of encrypted wisdom but simply poems. We need to keep in mind, however, the strangeness of this response and the singular displacement it produced, for it in fact transformed the very idea of the poem. Henceforth the essence of the poem is to be speech that says something other than what it says, that says the essence of speech in figures. Anti-representation is thereby split in two from the very beginning. On the one hand, it is the dissolution of the system of genres and the equality of subjects with respect to the power of *elocutio* alone. On the other hand, it is *elocutio*'s difference from itself, the depth of what makes speech possible. The generic name for this depth is spirit. But this depth is also what dispossesses speech, what confines its value to being the figurative expression of spirit. The poem is the song of a deaf-mute. It stands as a hieroglyph of the world of spirits that communicate in silence, a detour of thought still enclosed with the figure, a mirror of the community.

Literature is then caught between two nullifications. By making poetry a mode of language, Vico's poetics made prose into the *telos* of poetry. This poetics founded an idea of art that will find its most radical statement in Hegel's "death of art," the death of its function as the linguistic manifestation of a meaning in a form. The Flaubertian challenge of a poetics of prose, an absolutization of prose, is a response to this prosaic fate of poetry. Prose's power is freed from the representative hierarchy of subjects but also from the "poetry" that is the difference between language and what it says. What it brings to fruition as poetic difference is thus, properly speaking, the power of a void, a void that imperceptibly deepens the void of the infinite repetition of stupidity to the point where it ultimately becomes identical to it. The mastery that empties out speech then nullifies the literary project just as does, on the other side, the depth that fills it.

Literature takes up its place in the gap between these two nullifications: on one side, a generalized poeticity that swallows poetry up in its spirit, whether understood in the terms of Taine or Swedenborg; on the other, an absolutized prose that sinks down into the evanescence of its difference. This gap is not a nonplace, however. It defines a territory and its limits, spaces of compromise in which both the banal self-evidence of literature and radical experiences of literary contradiction find a home. The banalization of literature—no value judgment intended here—is, on the one hand, the neutralization of its opposing principles, and on the other hand and as a result of this compromise, the

creation of a continuity between representative poetics and expressive poetics in the form of a neutralized history of literature.

The form that is available to neutralize the antagonistic principles is the same one that had exacerbated their conflict: the genre-less genre of the novel. The naturalist configuration of the novel lends itself particularly well to the coincidence between the equality of subjects and the power of the linguistic reduplication of all things. This is also why the expressive novel can take up the representative drama's position as the typical or normative form of fiction. By abandoning the link between genre and subject, the expressive novel can still recuperate the link between the choice of subject chosen, the portrayal of characters, the arrangement of situations, and the forms of expression adequate to them. A "classicist" can avert his eyes from the subjects Zola gathers from the sewers. But Zola nonetheless obeys the precept that he reproached the authors of *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *The Sentimental Education* for forgetting: he writes within the classical use of speech to instruct, move, and convince. He has no difficulty, on the other hand, proving to those who love the new literature that he is not the "reporter" of the things of ordinary life but the poet of their secret poeticity. The speech of Gervaise, Coupeau, and Lantier does not copy expressions gathered in the streets but elevates them into literary language; the displays of Les Halles or *The Ladies' Paradise* are not the bric-a-brac of reality thrown together on the page but the modern poetry of things. The naturalist regime of description escapes the stasis that entrapped Flaubertian quietism and Balzacian "Sight" because it makes the representative architecture of the story, in which each part is organically connected to the whole, coincide with the poeticity of the garland of fragments, in which each part is a microcosm.

Thus literature can settle into its self-evidence and actively erase its difference. The continuity of its history can be constituted by enjambing any constitutive rupture. The naturalist regime of novelistic prose and the constitution of the common treasury of literature contribute separately to the same result, produced by a single cause: the passage from a normative poetics to a historical poetics. The works of the past lose their value as models to be imitated in the present, abolishing the separation between what can and cannot (or can no longer) be imitated. They can now be incorporated into a single common treasury in which neither generic classification nor the distinction between civilized and barbarous ages of poetry has any pertinence, in which Rabelais and Zola, Euripides and Shakespeare, Racine and Hugo are all manifestations, in their time and place, of the same eternal creative power. However much noise it may cause, the opposition between the privilege of creative geniuses and that of the environment that nourishes them is already reconciled within this common treasury.

Genius is always, it is said, the genius of a time, a place, and a people. And Lançon's history of authors replaced the literary history of civilizations as incarnated by Taine and Renan in the school manuals. But in either case spirit gets its due. An author's mind [*esprit*] is manifested in his work just as his mind reflects the spirit of a time of order or disorder, an environment of aristocratic refinement of bourgeois activity, a national genius of Mediterranean clarity or Nordic reverie. The pantheon of great authors and the genius of a civilization reflect one another.

Contemporary production and the recapitulation of the treasury can thus, in their distinction, together sustain the figure of a noncontradictory literature. But this non-contradiction is merely the neutralization of opposites. Thus it must logically give way in the face of any attempt to make the act of literature coherent with itself, to make it the putting into practice of a single fundamental principle. We have seen how symbolist fundamentalism was precisely an example of this sort of enterprise and how Mallarmé struggled with the paradox of a literature that, in the name of its own purity, vanished into the life of the spirit. This is the primary cause of the difficulty and rarity of the Mallarméan poem. The identity of the theater of the spirit and the thinking page might seem like the "mad" version of the symbolist program: the poem as the self-presentation of the life of the spirit. But it could also be the "backlash" of the idea: the artifice whereby it withdraws from this self-presentation and declares its own artifice.<sup>2</sup> The poem about a ship in the form of a ship drawn on the page could be either one or the other. Mallarmé's last word consists in the equivocation between the madness of Spirit and its parody, the witticism [*tour d'esprit*] that reclaims the artifice of art in any realization of Spirit. The resolution of this equivocation is fundamentally what is at stake in the liquidation of symbolism, which occurs in the two forms of surrealist radicalization and formalist literary criticism.

The first form draws an opposition between the dead letter of literature and the conquest of the powers of the spirit, as in this manifesto by the "Bureau of Surrealist Research":

We have nothing to do with literature.

But we are quite capable, when necessary, of making use of it like anyone else.

*Surrealism* is not a new means of expression, or an easier one, nor even a metaphysic of poetry.

It is a means of total liberation of the spirit *and of all that resembles it*.<sup>3</sup>

This declaration of war on literature in the name of the spirit certainly does bear the mark of Antonin Artaud, then the director of the "Bureau of Surrealist

Research.” But it also has a general value, not only as a formulation of the surrealist school but also as a fulfillment and reversal of the idea of pure literature. The pure literature of the symbolist age was a literature that had been brought back from the status of figurative language to that of the direct language of thought: not, to be sure, the language of indifferent signs that, for Hegel, is the instrument of a thought that has returned into itself, but a language appropriate to the primary rhythms of thought, to the curves and tempos of its movement before it has been fixed as a discourse of denotation, instruction, or seduction. In Mallarmé’s rationalism these rhythms were taken to be the “primitive rumbles of logic.” When symbolism is allied with anthroposophy or some other initiatic doctrine, they will become the surging spumes of the “worlds—of seas: of ‘Mothers’” invoked by Andrei Bely in *Kotik Letaev*. They will be the cosmic movements in which consciousness and the self momentarily emerge and then once again melt into the life of the Spirit on the day when “the word will flash like the sun” and “the ice of concepts, words, meanings [...] will grow out with much meaning.”<sup>4</sup> The symbolist form of the work negates itself as a form of work and presents itself as a form of life.

“We are going toward the *Spirit*. There’s no doubt about it, an oracle, I tell you.” The generation following Rimbaud’s took the ironic prophecy of *A Season in Hell* literally and identified it with the surprise of “I am thought” and the wood that wakes up a violin. At the end of the movement that separates it from reporting about worldly things, literature becomes testimony to the discovery of the spirit. Spirit is properly speaking what tears poetic expression away from the cloistered world of discourse and works to deliver it to an original experience of language and thought in which what is most intimate in thought turns out to be the same as its outside and the supreme power of speech the same as its being caught up in a primitive murmuring. “There was nothing inside: everything in me is all outside me: it had grown out; poured out: it exists, dances and spins; ‘I’ is ‘not-I’ [...] I am—with the spirit: I am—in the spirit!”<sup>5</sup> The “stripped-down mode of thought” appears as the vortex where it flees from itself. “Liberation of the spirit *and of all that resembles it*.” If the spirit is dissolution, what resembles it is called madness. The liberation of the spirit gives the old representation its precise contrary, which is neither expression nor form nor even music, but schizophrenic dissociation.

Literature, spirit, and madness then enter into a complex relation of attraction and repulsion. In both the symbolist and surrealist versions, the adventure of the spirit affirms, in opposition to the dead works of literature, the experience of a language and a thought that return toward their source, that restore the work to the spirit and the spirit to the secret, voiceless, and foreign forces of

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life. On the one hand, this movement of the spirit is inherent in the constitutive tension of literature that draws it toward the other space that speech designates as the locus of its power. On the other hand, the movement that sends the work toward the schizophrenic powers of life runs into a countervailing movement that leads from life to literature and from the dissociation experienced by the spirit to self-recovery through literature. The manifesto to the liberation of the spirit to which Artaud put his signature cannot be read apart from the singular criss-cross seen in his exchange with Jacques Rivière. Artaud reproached the literary review editor—to whom he sent his poems and who found them unpublishable—for having a purely “literary evaluation” of these texts. They are not literature but the manifestations of his spiritual existence, that is, traces of thought for which there are no words, of thought that flees from itself. His intention had not been to submit works, he says, so much as a “mental case.” But his argument seems to rest on a misunderstanding, since what interests Rivière is precisely the “case” and what it reveals, namely the fragile border between the normal functioning of the mind [*esprit*]—its normal anarchy, if you will, Valéry’s preferred field of study—and the pathology of this anarchy, the free course that will lead it, if nothing gets in the way and stops it, toward dissociation. For Rivière the pure spirit that the surrealists oppose with the paltry works of “literature” is the catastrophe of madness, the catastrophe of a thought that loses control over itself since it cannot overcome its obstacles. In short, Rivière takes up and radicalizes Flaubert’s opposition between the work and hysteria. But this opposition is what Artaud contests. The very gap between his thought and the “shreds” that are his poems requires that the “*real* value, the initial value” of his thought and of his poems as *productions of that thought* be taken into account. The name he gives to this real value is *literary* value. He thus lays claim to the “literary existence” of these poems that are not literature. He thinks that the very description of his illness has proven that he has a mind “that literarily exists.” Once again it is in the name of this “literary” existence that he refuses Rivière’s proposal to publish their exchange as a sort of epistolary novel, that is, to “place on the literary level a thing which is the very cry of life.” Thus literature is both the lie of the dead letter that is condemned in the name of the life of the spirit and the affirmation of what resists the illness of that life. Literature is what resists the madness that claims to show it its own destiny once the contestation of the exteriority of the work makes it appear as a form of life.

A singular relation is thus established between the work and the absence of the work. It is true, as Foucault said, that madness and the work have a mutual repulsion. But the work wrests itself from madness only by denying its autonomy and presenting itself as the trace of thought. For Artaud the adjective

“literary” continues to qualify a state of thought or testimony to this state. This explains Artaud’s agreement to Rivière’s proposal to publish the letters rather than the poems, even if a few extracts from the poems must be included as illustrations. This might seem like the most insulting proposal one could make to a poet. Artaud, however, accepts enthusiastically; he thus implicitly accepts Rivière’s judgment that his lucid analyses of his illness are superior to the poems that testify to its effects. What his acceptance signifies is that in his view poems and letters are equivalent traces or tokens of his “literary” existence and that they are literary precisely on account of what prevents them from being a work, that makes them part of the score life must settle with itself, “the small, indefectible, truthful quivering of pain emerging from age-old cataclysms.” But it is not a personal matter that is at stake here. The score life must settle with itself might be neither the great cosmic drama evoked by Artaud the writer nor the simple illness of Artaud the individual. It is also the contradiction of the essential language that symbolism claimed to be the principle of literature. It is the extreme form of the quest for a “divine numerator of our apotheosis,” a quest that reaches Mallarmé’s “central gulf,” the mythical void of the essence of the poem that here comes to coincide with the void that separates the sufferer from his words and his thought. “Mental illness” is also the limit of the tension that leads literary autonomy toward the radical heteronomy of “its” language.

There are two ways to deal with this proximity of literature and madness. The first is to grant literature its own domain by radically separating true and feigned madness, which means, in other terms, separating the language of the work from that of life. This is the heart of the formalist enterprise. Formalism has conveniently been chalked up to a self-referential perversion, reduced, as if to its hidden and shameful source, to Novalis’s formula of language only concerned with itself.<sup>8</sup> But the notion of “self-referentiality” is only the reduction to a single term of the Romantic contradiction, of the duality affecting the level of *elocutio* onto which the representative trinity of *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* were collapsed. In fact “self-referentiality” is the back-and-forth movement between the alternative poles of Romantic language, between Swedenborg’s mystical language and Schlegel’s witticism [*mot d'esprit*]. At its core, formalism proposes a conception of the work’s autonomy modeled on wit in opposition to the symbolist dissolution of the work in the mystical chaos of the spirit. Formalism is certainly closely related to the initial formulations of Romanticism, but as a counter-interpretation. A particularly clear example of this reversal can be seen in the use that Viktor Shklovsky, one of the theorists of Russian formalism, makes of one of the exemplary novels of symbolist interpretation, his compatriot Andrei Bely’s *Kotik Letaev*. Bely uses the story of a child’s birth

into language and consciousness as the occasion for an illustration of the doctrines of anthroposophy; he attempts to connect the powers of language with the great primordial sea of cosmic myth. Shklovsky's analysis opposes this fable of the origin of language in two ways. He first shows the contradiction at the heart of Bely's enterprise. The will to identify the work with the cosmic movement of spirit is overturned, Shklovsky argues, by the fictional, figurative, and verbal matter called upon to accomplish it. The author throws his symbols toward the great primordial sea of myth, but the logic proper to the work moves in the opposite direction. It leads the sheaf of symbols en route to the primordial sea back toward the play of language. It turns them into a series of metaphors—a construction of words and images—as opposed to the language of “life.” The logic of the work reduces the value of every symbol to that of a trope. It furthermore demands a reinterpretation of what a trope is. The trope is no longer an illustration of thought as it was for classicism, nor is it the original mode of language and thought described by Vico. “The singer’s task was not to convey a certain thought in words but to construct a set of sounds having a definite relation to one another that would be called form.”<sup>9</sup> Language’s noncoincidence with itself is not a hidden depth but a rearrangement of its elements. What it produces is form, an unusual way of speaking that displaces the attributes of signification and delays or accelerates the movement of meaning. It is a sequence of language that shows itself for what it is. Where Bely wanted to present a symbol of eternity, he only created a character, that is, a particular verbal formula.

It is thus an alternative fable of the entrance into language that stands in contrast here to the symbolist fable that leads language back to the great primordial sea. The opposite of the child who figures in the anthroposcopic epic of spirit is the horse in *Kholstomer* to whom Tolstoy gives speech and who seeks to understand what humans mean when they use the words *my* and *mine*. This fictional character is the equivalent of the technique of singularization that allows each object to be described as if seen for the first time and each event to be narrated “as if it were happening for the first time.”<sup>10</sup> This is how the primacy of *elocutio* needs to be understood: the structure of the fiction, with its characters and events, is that of a language game. The character is a verbal image, a way of speaking; the order of events is the working out of a riddle or a pun. Events and groups of persons develop in relations of parallelism and opposition just like those of rhyme. Composition is the development of a trope. The true subject of every novel, finally, is this development, as is exemplified by the novel *par excellence*, another fable of childhood, *Tristram Shandy*. The narrator’s burlesque tale of his life before his birth in the form of an infinite digression is identical to

the direct presentation of the novelistic form itself, the form that constitutes the true subject of any novel.

This dynamic proper to poetic language imposes its autonomous laws on both the creator's will and spiritual anarchy. But these laws are not those of a language reflecting upon itself; the accusation of "self-reflexivity" is beside the question. The "formalist" poetics Shklovsky derives from Tolstoy's story is the same as the militant poetics of Voltaire's Huron. Similarly, his analysis of Chekhov's early stories, which create deceptive appearances that will be cleared up by the end, reproduces the techniques of the poetics of calculated effects theorized by Poe. In the end, this is nothing more than the Aristotelian plot built upon a character's misunderstanding, a plot that has the same structure as wit.<sup>11</sup> Mallarmé's whole project can be described as the contradictory will to unite this poetics of artifice with the symbolist theory of essential language. Formalism resolves the contradiction: Poetic language consists of the techniques by which another modality of meaning occurs, the form in which language makes sense by showing itself rather than disappearing behind what is said as in normal usage. Formalist form in its principle is a distich, epigram, or pun. But this second resource of language itself belongs to the world of experience. It does not contrast the man of communication to the solitude of language, but rather to *homo ludens*—the dockers consulted by Malherbe, who produce witticisms and metaphors without noticing—that the art of writing is forever rediscovering as its prototype.

What stands in opposition to symbolist dissociation is thus not an ultimate culmination of the self-referentiality inherent in the Romantic theory of language and literature. It is rather something like a modern Aristotelianism, mediated by the references to Poe and Sterne: a conception of fiction as the pleasure produced by wit that separates words from their usage and effects from their anticipation. The Romantic revolution has freed this Aristotelianism from the constraints of the representative system of genre; it in turn liberates Romanticism from the dead weight of the symbol. In opposition to the poetics of genre and the poetics of life we now also find a Romantico-Aristotelian poetics of forms: the poem-epigram, the tale-pun, the novel-distich or the novel-digression. Every story and every metaphor is a witticism. In this case the identification of poetry with a mode of language is in harmony with both the equality of subjects and the old power of narrative. The essence of literature can be identified with the ludic use of language in general. The old word "fancy" and the new word "technique" are now equivalent.

Thus the literary conflict between the letter and its spirit tends to spread between two poles: one where spirit is the power of dissociation that produces

the truth of literature in the dissolution or the impossibility of works of literature, the other where it becomes wit [*jeu d'esprit*], the ability to create ever new forms through the systematic exploration of the possibilities of language. On the one hand literary speech becomes the expression of a sacred *pathos*, a radical experience of the condition of the speaking being; on the other, it manifests man's abilities to play and build. In a sense these two figures of literature—the pure act or the pure passion of the speaking being—are nothing more than the fixation on opposite poles of the two terms of the Romantic contradiction of the intentional-unintentional work. These two figures, emblematised by the names of Edgar Allan Poe and Antonin Artaud, still today nourish opposing discourses on literature. But in their very opposition they produce a shared effect: They erase the internal contradiction of literature, the contradiction it keeps trying to master between necessary form and indifferent content. They thereby displace literature's center of gravity away from the work and toward the idea of the speaking being with which they identify literary experience. On this ground, the pure *pathos* of the man who is preyed upon by spirit and the ludic act of the creator of forms converge in the single figure of man as storyteller.

The radical experience of spirit in which every artistic form is dissolved and the enchantment of the wit that transforms all linguistic matter into form can then be taken as equivalent. Thirty years after the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton affirmed *play* as the essence of the surrealist activity.<sup>12</sup> But he adds, following Huizinga, that play itself makes apparent “the supralogical character of our position in the cosmos” and that the conscious attributes of poetic quality derive from the “primordial quality of play.” Deleuze’s concept of “fabulation” brings together in an exemplary way the play of the formula and the experience of dissociation. The metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s novella or the stubbornness of Bartleby the scrivener in Melville’s story are, for Deleuze, simultaneously “formulas” in the sense of Shklovsky or Poe and mythical figures of the passage between two universes in the manner of *Kotik Letaev*. Deleuze reads Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” as expressing both the pure comic power of the formula, of a man turned into a linguistic formula, and a great myth in which “psychosis pursues its dream of establishing a function of universal fraternity that no longer passes through the father, but is built on the ruins of the paternal function [ . . . ].”<sup>13</sup> The idea of fabulation binds together the two poles of art as artifice and as the vital experience of the spirit. The writer is a conjurer and a physician, the physician of his own illness. Literature is formula and myth, the play of fabulation and the clinic where psychotic delirium treats paranoid delirium.

This interpretation of the literary fact, by enclosing it in the play of myth and formula, between formalist and clinical discourses, tends to erase the war between forms of writing that constitutes literary specificity and is the paradoxical matrix of its works. It erases the tension that inhabits the work when the work undertakes to realize the essence of literature and runs up against the “spiritual life” that claims to be the principle of such a realization. It is with respect to this erasure that Proust’s question takes on its meaning: how can literature escape the contradiction between the “gravity of the expression” and the “frivolity of the subject”? But also, how can literature be saved from its own gravity, which drowns its works in the night of the spirit? The exemplary nature of Proust’s work consists in the way it restages the entire theater of literary contradiction at the very moment when its elements are in the course of fleeing into the cheerful play of form or the sacred *pathos* of spirit. The redistribution of the play between pure act and pure *pathos* then occurs in the work itself, in its effort to make form and content adequate to one another. Proust’s contradictory declarations need to be judged in this light. As is well known, there is almost no proposition, whether in his correspondence and interviews, or in the *ars poetica* that he develops in the course of *Time Regained*, that is not belied by another or that does not turn out to be logically inconsistent and ambiguous. The *Remembrance*, he says, is a fictional construction, a “dogmatic” work in which everything has been invented by the author in order to serve his demonstration. But the book “is not in any degree a work of reasoning,” for all of its elements have been provided by Proust’s sensuous experience.<sup>14</sup> “A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it.” But this proposition is itself a theory contained within a theoretical development several dozen pages in length. We should interpret our sensations “as signs of so many laws and ideas.” But what precisely is the sign of a law? The book is a cathedral, or rather a dress that is gradually made from the addition of new pieces. But what dress has ever been made like that?

There is a simple way to deal with the contradictions and equivocations raised by each of these formulations of Proust’s, which consists in separating the work from what the author says about it and attributing the inconsistencies to the historical and ideological lenses through which he viewed his work. But how can we distinguish, in a novel whose particular subject is the possibility of the work, between what belongs to the work itself and what belongs to Proust’s consciousness of it? This would require us to remove not only all the discussions of the work but also all the episodes that were conceived as their illustrations. We would have to completely undo the structure of the work under the pretext of considering it on its own terms. Indeed, if there is a contradiction it is

not between the work and Proust's consciousness of it but within the principle that gives rise to it. And this contradiction concerns the contradiction of literature itself. Proust's goal is to make literature coherent, to give it the material that corresponds to its form. But this project duplicates both form and material and sends us back and forth between each side's internal contradiction. This infinite spinning between the contradictions of the work and of the spirit, the nondescript and the essential, the intentional and the non-intentional, artifice and *pathos*, in which the work finds its dynamism, is precisely the dynamic of the contradictions of literature.

Proust's point of departure is the reversal of the contradiction between the indifference of the thing spoken of and the necessity of form. What is to be made of the radical experiences that are the necessary content of the work: a joy born from the unevenness of paving stones, the burning sensation provoked by a piece of green canvas plugging a broken window pane, the farewell to the trees that have nothing more to say? "Should I make it into a novel, a philosophical study, am I a novelist?"<sup>15</sup> These simultaneously essential and aleatory experiences provide literature with a material that allows it to escape the impasse constituted by the Flaubertian frivolity of subject that drags form down into its insignificance and the Mallarmean essentiality that leads to the paralysis of writing. But the question of material leads back to the question of form, not only as a personal question (how can one write a novel when one has "no imagination"?), but also in its general form: how should the "form of art" that realizes the unity of literary matter and its form be conceptualized? How is it possible to get beyond Flaubert's "frivolity" without falling back into the Balzacian dissociation of visionary illumination and interminable chatter? Of course Proust, as a good reader of the *Arabian Nights*, has a key to open both doors, the word that opens the cave of material—*impression*—and the word that gives access to form—*architecture*. The problem is that each of these words implies a poetics that seems to contradict the other. Each also imposes an entirely opposite logic upon the other: the impression proposes the key at every moment or never, whereas architecture commands the single instant when the door should open. But each of them can also be duplicated: the impression is an impossible alliance between pure sensation and the engraved text, of what is within and what is without. Architecture is a balance of volumes and a forest of symbols, church and druidic stones. We have here an exposition of the whole theater of literature—or, if one prefers, the "poetry of poetry." But the form of this exposition contests both ways in which literature is dissolved in the spirit: assimilation to the successful inventions of wit and identification with the spirit's self-externalization. It contests them both to

the extent that it contains them both: it is in fact the movement of their reciprocal contestation.

The entire answer to the question of material is summarized by the word “impression.” The material of the book can only be essential if it is necessary. It is necessary only if we are not free to choose it, that is, if it is imposed on us. But for Proust this impression takes on some remarkable characteristics: The impression is obligatory material insofar as it is a sign; it is already writing. The impression is double not only because it is felt in two temporalities at once; it is double because it is both the shock that disorients, breaks the boundaries of the world, and brings forth primordial chaos, and, on the contrary, the sign of the god who orders, creates meaning, establishes correspondences, and determines vocations. Dionysus’s realm is that of Apollo and Hermes. The formless world of Schopenhauerian “will” is both Swedenborg’s universe of correspondences and Vico or Hegel’s language of sensuous images awaiting their meanings. The idea educed by contemplation is not only essence but also text and matrix of writing. The dual harmony of inside and outside is organized on this basis: the sensuousness of the world is inscribed within a being who neglects to observe it; this inscription takes on the privileged form of a set of signs to be deciphered. Behind the idler who does not work at literature and the author whose imagination fails him, there is a spiritual self, a subject who can and must find within himself the spiritual equivalent of every sensuous impression, the secret hidden behind the relation of three steeples or three trees.

This spirituality, however, occurs in a curious mode, that of a *trompe-l’oeil*, an artifice of nature by which the same sensation is felt in both the present and the past. A quasi-purposiveness in Kant’s terms, echoing some older formulation of the inscription of signs within us:

Every leaf, every apple blossom intoxicated me with its perfection, going beyond all my expectations of beauty. But at the same time I felt that there was within me an unformulated but corresponding beauty, which I wanted to be able to say and which *would have been* the cause of the apple blossoms’ beauty.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the artifice is above all that of the author who has carefully prepared and reworked these epiphanic sensations with the precise purpose of introducing the widest possible gap between cause and effect, between the triviality of the sensation (the clash of paving stones, the sound of spoons or hammers) and the wealth of the spiritual universe it unfolds, and thus of assuring, in these few original metaphors, the unity of the contradictory principles of Romantic poetics: the indifference of the subject and the essentiality of the language of the spirit.

For, in truth, there is no inscription to be read in the depths of the self, no hidden secret to be caught behind the movements of the three steeples. The unique secret they reveal is the same as the unique secret yielded by the phrases of Vinteuil's sonata or septuor. The written page that relates the secret always has the same principle. The spiritual equivalent of the moving spectacle of the three steeples has no existence outside the chain of metaphors and correspondences that runs through the realms of nature and the forms of art, transforming the stones of the steeples into birds, golden pivots, flowers painted upon the sky, and maidens in a legend, before making them blur into silhouettes and vanish into the night. This is what is "behind" the three steeples, as "behind" Vinteuil's musical phrases is a lily-white pastoral dawn or a reddening daybreak over a stormy sea; the cooing of a dove or a mystical cock-crow; a grave and gentle Bellini seraph or a Mantegna archangel. Similarly, "behind" the stiff wipe of a starched napkin is "the plumage of an ocean green and blue like the tail of a peacock." The unfolding of the Japanese flower or the development of "negatives" left in the depths of the self by sensation are nothing more than the unfolding of writing. This is why the Romantic image of hieroglyphs to decipher can be the equivalent of the scientific image that assimilates the metaphorical relation between two distinct objects with that between two phenomena subsumed under a single causal law. Hieroglyph and law are interchangeable, not following the *fin-de-siècle* confusion between the structure of the scientific world and the arcana of the spiritual world, but simply because both are equally metaphors of metaphor. The deciphering of the secret, like the demonstration of the law, is only the unfolding of the optical illusion, the chain of metaphors that establish a cosmogony in passing from sound to painting, from the concertist's violin to birdsong and from birdsong to the theorbo or trumpet of a musical angel, from mineral to vegetal and from vegetal to human, from utensil to bird, from air to sea, from waking to noon and from noon to night. What is at stake, the author tells us, is the deciphering and clarification of the impression written in us that is the material mark of truth. But the double mark of the impression is only the myth of writing. The writing of the book declares itself dependent upon a pre-established harmony: The pure impression is presented as the intimate alliteration of things, the rhyme of spiritual life. This impression supposedly duplicates itself by being written in the mind. Whence the ambivalence of Proust's "everything is in the mind," the appeal to "inner life" that seems to contradict what the novel says everywhere else: that on the contrary everything is outside of us, in the inner power that enables sensations—sun or fog, a porcelain cup or what one dips in it, the sound of a hammer or a spoon—to give rise to the life of the spirit. But the contradiction itself participates in the optical illusion.

The rhyming of things and the correspondence of inside and outside are a mere product of writing. Pure sensation strikes and upsets the ordered universe of associations and beliefs, but it does not write and it leaves behind no negative that merely waits to be developed. On the contrary, the particular quality of the impression and the joy it produces stem from its singularity, the fact that it refers to nothing but itself. It may issue an appeal but it inscribes no message, not even a hieroglyphic one. The “inner hieroglyph” is only the metaphor of the impossible identity between the *one* of the shock and the *two* of metaphor. The thread of real life linking the “impressions” in a text is entirely to be constructed. Spirit is only the labor of metaphor that makes the Arpajon drawing-room into a yellow butterfly and the Swann drawing-room into a black one, that reflects the water and the carafe in the Vivonne in one another, or the milk and the porcelain cup of a country morning that rhymes with other mornings, the smell of a fire and a child of long ago.

Thus the great discovery that it is the work that clarifies obscure sensations is in fact a tautology. “Reading” is merely writing, and the development of “negatives” merely the fabrication of colored glass for magic lanterns. The life of the spirit is neither within nor without but entirely in writing. It is metaphor alone that unfolds and makes multifold the *one* of pure sensation that punctures the concatenation of habits and beliefs. Metaphor, as a power of both order and disorder, is charged with a twofold labor. It brings together distant objects and makes their coming-together speak. But metaphor also undoes the laws of representation. It is metaphor that inverts earth and sea on Elstir’s canvas, in conformity with the truth of vision that is also the truth of its illusion. The net woven from metaphors and metamorphoses accompanies the vacillation of representation and displays its power. But it also holds it back at the edge of collapse where the stumbling of feet on the ground of reality—that is, the ordinary associations of the representative universe—would lead it. The wheel of metamorphoses melding the elements is one dissociation of representation in opposition to another dissociation, the greater disorganization of the night that not only separates days from one another but envelops the order of days. “Spiritual life,” “real life at last illuminated”—that is, literature—is identical with the tissue of metaphors that both accompany and hold back the vacillation of a world, on the border of waking and dreaming, of the stable organizations of habit—of representation—and of primordial chaos. The music of the “perpetual adoration” or “Good Friday Spell,” heard between the Guermantes’ courtyard and library, rises against the background of the night of disorientation and terror that opens the *Remembrance* and lays out all its themes. The unique vision, particular to each individual, that the narrator celebrates is not the treasure an explorer

brings back from the calm realm of essences. It marks the fragile limit separating poetic disindividualization from schizophrenic dissociation. In this respect we can counterbalance the poetico-scientific metaphor of the explorer whose descent into the inner darkness allows the creation of a poetic atmosphere correlative to the depth to which he plunged with a quite different image. Proust took some time to strike from the draft of the opening episode of the *Remembrance* a passage assimilating the instant the sleeper awakens to the feelings of a jam jar suddenly called to conscious life, becoming conscious of the night and aspiring to nothing more than “the fastest possible return to the delicious insensibility of shelf and cupboard, of other jam jars and darkness.”<sup>17</sup> Between these two images is laid out the central paradox of the work, the seemingly contradictory but “not impossible” task of a mind moving from one edge of sleep to the other.<sup>18</sup> Between these two limits are stretched the metaphors of Ali Baba’s cave that hold back the vacillation of the world into the primordial depths, the thousand and one nights of the book written to defer not so much death as the jam jar’s return to the cupboard. Virginia Woolf will identify this “anesthesia” with madness as embodied in the character of Septimus Warren Smith, who represents the final figure of the madman as the victim of the book at whose expense, eversince *Don Quixote*, the act of writing has tested its own mastery.

There thus are no grounds for separating the work itself from false consciousness concerning it. The double mark of the “impression” is the myth of writing, but this myth itself is caught up in the labor or writing. It commands the deployment of its allegories in the imagination, which in return produce its reality, the metaphor of the inner book harmonizing with the alliterations of things. It is caught up in the movement of the work between its inside and its outside, which is also the trajectory of the precarious interval between the disruption of the order of days and the nocturnal world of terror. Both joining and separating writing and life, the “myth of writing” repatriates the obscure world of “the spirit and all that resembles it” into the world of writing. This is also why there are no grounds for constructing a coherence of Proustian schizophrenia that would neglect the architectural will.<sup>19</sup> For this will is not only a matter of the author’s declarations; it shows itself in a flagrant way at all moments of the work. Architecture is the other key (or skeleton key) to Ali Baba’s cave, the other way to transform the work’s contradiction into its solution—an other way pointed to by the contradiction of the impression.

The paradox that “impression” leaves for “architecture” to resolve is in fact twofold. The first problem is the easiest to see: a book is not made from a handful of epiphanies. The poetics of impression allows one to write prose poems, not a novel. These epiphanies must be ordered and linked in a story, a plot in

which the quest for knowledge leads the hero to the Aristotelian moment of recognition when he finds the formula that opens the door to the cave. In short, Romantic poetics can only be set forth in a novel if it employs a classical plot of knowledge. But an even more difficult problem appears at this point. The classical ordering of plot complication and resolution leads to the recognition of what had been unknown. But the enigma of the *Remembrance* is in fact known from the outset. The door that the story should unlock has been held open by the labor of metaphor since the beginning. From the moment that he tastes the madeleine, the hero could have grasped the idea that he will only “discover” at the end of the story, but which the writer—speaking in the same voice—has already laid out for us. Better yet, he already put this discovery into practice in the description of the three steeples of Martinville. The young man from Combray already knows how to “decipher” the hieroglyphs of the world. The architectural plot thus does not respond to the necessity of attaining knowledge of the unknown but rather to that of distancing the knowledge that is constantly within the hero’s reach, of deferring a truth that has always already been given by the poetics of impression and whose advent can only be redundant. The proper Aristotelian ordering of the story that leads from the unknown to the known, or the Hegelian trajectory that harmonizes the end with the beginning in the form of the transformation of unconscious truth into conscious certainty, here becomes identical with what seemed to be their opposite: the uncontrolled meandering of Steme’s story that allows us to get lost in the labyrinth of the prenatal life of Tristram Shandy. The rigorous logic of the *Remembrance* has become an infinite digression.

It is of course possible to give this digression the aspect of beautiful order. The hero must pass all the traps that prevent him from grasping the so-close truth that opens the book’s path. He must learn the opposition between the labor of art and aesthetic idolatry incarnated in the character of Swann, who wants to put art into life, find a Giorgione painting in Odette, and make Vinteul’s phrases into the “national anthem” of his love. He must also learn from suffering in love to recognize the fatal illusion that transforms the pure happiness of a moving spot seen on the horizon over the sea at Balbec into the properties of a singular being to be possessed. He should have been content to “decipher” or “illuminate” this fluid and collective beauty by turning the group of five girls (like the group of three steeples) on the wheel of metaphors that make the realms of nature and art communicate: madrepore, flock of gulls performing their measured tread upon the sands, Arabian king in a Renaissance picture of the epiphany, bower of Pennsylvania roses breaking the line of the sea, Chopin’s musical phrases, assembly of birds, statues exposed to the sunlight on a Grecian shore.

The negative examples of the esthete's vanity and the lover's pain teach the hero the meaning of art and the proper path of metaphor. He must traverse the circles of error in order to win the land of truth. But the necessity of such a demonstration, which the author addresses to the reader, is a lure if we take it to be logic of the fiction, the path of the hero's discovery. For if the truth is given in the shock of the impression rather than derived from experience, then the hero has nothing to learn from experience, which merely repeats itself before him. He can of course become conscious of the laws of passion and society, the "truths of the intellect" that can be given the Spinozist designation of knowledge of the second kind. But there is a hiatus between this discursive knowledge and the shock of truth or the ability to write the work. However knowledgeable he may have become about the illusions of love and society, the hero has not advanced an inch toward the aleatory revelation that will allow him to take the opposite path and repatriate the associations that caused the pains of love in the metaphors of art. He is always equally distant from the writer who, throughout his trajectory, performs this inverse operation at his expense. The form of the *Bildungsroman* is thus an optical illusion. Wilhelm Meister's disjointed adventures could grant him access to the wisdom already possessed by those who secretly oversaw his wanderings. But Wilhelm Meister did not write; he merely lent his fictional body to the writer Goethe. For the same reasons, Friedrich Schlegel could identify his adventure with the progress of the poetry of poetry. In contrast, the methodical traversal of antiartistic errors and the knowledge gained by the hero of the *Remembrance* can never be enough to make him a writer. There is no reason for the path of knowledge and that of becoming-an-artist to have to cross. They cross only when the epiphanic sensation plays its double role as the conversion-event that stops infinite wandering and as the Japanese flower that contains the book in potential form.

Architecture delegates its task to the impression, as the impression does to architecture. Both sides in this game have the capability to separate and to unite. Architecture weaves the epiphanic sensations into the texture of the novel even as it holds off a premature revelation. The impression interrupts the architecture of the apprenticeship story in order to produce the junction, beyond the reach of that story, between the work and life. This double game, no doubt, makes possible a double reading. The first takes note of the break and identifies it with the distance between the actual work and the discourse that is its parasite. It points to the importance, beyond the Romantic myths of written truth and the poetry of poetry, of the knowledge and the portraits elaborated by the journey through society and across the passions. The second leaps across the gap in order to valorize, behind the veil of the Stendhalian tale of the crystallization

of love and the Balzacian comedy of society, the philosophical *Bildungsroman* and the formation of genius.<sup>20</sup> But both readings seem to miss the heart of the matter: if *Remembrance of Things Past* can be thought of as the fulfillment of the Romantic program of the poem that is the poetry of poetry, this fulfillment can only be accomplished through the fissure that separates the poem from its poetry, through the shuttling between architecture and the impression, through the identity of the power to unite and the power to separate. The poetry of poetry does not close its circle through the sort of dialectical fulfillment that identifies the becoming of the true with the construction of the demonstration. It only “proves” literature by exhibiting its contradiction, making that contradiction the principle of the work, the shuttle between the work and discourse about the work, between the experience of life and the artifice of art. The two sides only communicate through their separation. The apparent “closure” of the work is its movement of infinitization, an infinitization that challenges the fate Hegel assigned to the bad infinite, of the interminable self-demonstration of the artistic act, by constructing the space of fictional indiscernibility in which the poem unites with and separates from the poetry of poetry, the inside with and from the outside, the work with and from the discourse about the work. The shuttle between “impression” and “architecture” is not merely a confrontation between ecstatic truth and constructed truth. The truth of the book, the truth in action of literature is the conflict between these truths, the movement that makes them work together and against one another.

This allows us to evaluate the contradictory discourses concerning the pertinence of the architectural metaphor in defining the compositional principle of the book and the efficaciousness of its organization. Whatever Proust might have said about the entirely fictional and calculated character of the book, we know perfectly well that he included haphazard and barely transposed autobiographical elements, events such as World War I that he could hardly have foreseen, or recycled articles written for *Le Figaro*. Deleuze’s attempt to construct a coherence of this Proustian “body without organs,” on the other hand, cannot hide the obstinate teleology of a novel generated by an essay and begun from the two ends, nor the effects of symmetry endlessly multiplied throughout the text. It is true that Proust constantly inserts new biographical elements and circumstantial fragments in the so-called calculated order of the story; it is equally true that he immediately places these episodes in symmetrical relations with one another, that he takes them up into the necessity of mornings that rhyme with other mornings, of the present that rhymes with the past as the bookcase does with the ocean, the silhouette with the mythological divinity, any décor with what it reflects and every content with what contains it. The

unanticipated event of world war thus allows a new voyage through the book that makes its episodes symmetrical. Combray comes back to life in Françoise's dialogue with the gardener transplanted in a Parisian apartment, as does Doncières in Saint-Loup's discussions on strategy now that the hour of application has come. The transom in Jupien's shop becomes the little oval window in his "hotel"; the city under the spectacular lights of bombs and airplanes becomes once more a village; the statues of the "French" church of Saint-André-des-Champs will transmit their souls to the soldiers. The anarchic introduction of elements from life constantly belies the mirage of the "architectural and pre-meditated" book. But the novelistic "architecture" has an indefinite capacity to give order to this matter that grows in defiance of any law of organization, to align the fragments on the axis of narrative progression or arrange them in the space of symmetries. For the story's "architecture," in fact, is always double, and there are no grounds for opposing the totalizing model of the cathedral to the aleatory model of a gelatin dish containing entirely diverse ingredients. For the "totality" is one of a very particular kind. Indeed, Proust's poetics radically exploits the specific character of the Romantic cathedral, namely its multiplicity. The cathedral is a building calculated by an architect and whose arches must join precisely. But it is also the profusion of the figures of the sculpted book that metaphorize its spirit. It is the spiritual and mathematical ordering of the stone nave oriented toward the choir and the anarchy of projecting chapels whose decoration is totally heteroclite; the line drawn in the windows by the lead filaments and the light they filter and that color the drawings in stone; the massive façade and its dissolution in the sunshine. Every element introduced into the book can find its place as a stained-glass window, statue, or capital; every capital can be either an element in the garland of flowers or a support of the narrative edifice—or both at once.<sup>21</sup>

For the cathedral is neither the myth used by the writer's discourse to dissimulate the disorder of the book nor the artifice that would allow any addition to be rationalized. It is the fictional machine that disrupts order and orders chaos by transposing the linear story and the great wheel of metaphors, by putting the conflict between the principles of literature to work. Above all, it is the theoretical machine that takes hold of all the elements of Romantic poetics, all the contradictions that exploded the work and dissolved it in the life of the spirit, in order to repatriate them in the book by making them the elements of its fictional construction. This "repatriation," as we have seen, was Mallarmé's great dream. But this dream was impossible for so long as literature demanded a language of its own and a proper space of exhibition. Mallarmé's project was caught between the old paradigm of theatrical exhibition and the new musical

paradigm. He sought a properly literary staging of the spirit—upon a page that mimed thought or in a theatrical performance of the book—repatriated from the domain of music that had chased away the simulacra of old-style theater. He thus ran up against the paradox of literature, which can only unify its contradictory principles if it borrows a principle from the representative order. In conformity with the “linguistic” spirit of the Romantic revolution, Mallarmé sought the point of encounter in the domain of the principle of presence and speech in action. He sought to consecrate literature as a spectacle of speech. Mallarmé’s setback, by the same token, was above all the manifestation of the separation between the site of speech and the theatrical stage. Literature cannot be consecrated on that stage since, in its principle, it separates seeing and saying. The art of representation was an art of speech that showed by showing itself. The art of literature is the art that shows without showing, the “deceptive” art of the room we do not enter or the island that explodes the story’s topography. It can thus hold together the capacities of seeing and saying that it separates, but only on the condition that speech is not to be seen. The future history of theater is the history of this singular revelation: speech no longer belongs on the theatrical stage. The stage is both too material and not material enough: too material for the power of deception that the art of speech now finds to be its paradoxical privilege; not material enough for all the incarnations through which the poem seeks to conjure away this loss by making itself the language of bodies and things. Henceforth the theatrical stage will be the site of this disagreement; in order to regulate its protocol a new art will have to be invented: *mise en scène*.

Literature’s own site is elsewhere: in the space of the deceptive speech that unites and separates the novel and discourse about the novel. Not on some scene where speech would be incarnated: on the contrary, where it endlessly measures the absence of incarnation, where it renounces the idea of having a language of its own to separate literary art from common literariness and a stage of its own to “prove” itself by eliminating the gap between the work and commentary on the work. In comparison with Mallarmé’s impossible proof, the paradoxical success of Proust’s proof consists in the assumption of these conditions. Not simply in accepting them, for Proust in a sense continues to reject them. He sets out from the symbolist proposition of a book written in a language proper to the spirit: a book that would be a “child of silence,” that would have “no portion with the children of speech,” a book whose sentences and episodes would be made from “the transparent substance of our best moments.”<sup>22</sup> Of course no book will ever be made from this substance any more than music could be the pure language of the communication of souls dreamed during the

pause in the septuor. “Humanity has developed along other lines” and the pure language of origins is the work of Mademoiselle Vinteuil’s perverse friend who was the sole “translator” of the musician’s hieroglyphs. The entire *Remembrance* can be read as the metamorphosis of the impossible book composed of “drops of light.” It is only in this way that music can be “repatriated” in the book, in the gap between the musical myth and the fictionalization of music, between the impossible sentences made of the language of light and the undiscoverable “episodes” of transparent substance. Literature exists only as the fiction of literature. Not under the flattering form of the tale that both exhibits and hides its “secret,” but rather as the infinite crossing between two borders, from life to work and work to life, from the work to discourse about it and from discourse about the work to the work itself, an unceasing crossing that can only occur insofar as it leaves the tear visible.

# CONCLUSION

## A SKEPTICAL ART

“**A** WRITER REASONS, that is to say he goes astray, when he has not the strength to force himself to make an impression pass through all the successive states which will culminate in its fixation, its expression.”<sup>1</sup> To the distracted reader, this famous sentence from *Time Regained* might seem fairly anodyne. It is likely to be found suspicious, however, by the critical reader who is alert to the dubious ambiguity of “expression” and “impression” and quick to ask precisely what the transformation of one into the other means. But in order to understand what this sentence means, and to understand the function of the “myths” of literature themselves, we ought to set it into contrast with the constantly varied declarations of one of Proust’s contemporaries, who, in both public and private texts, waged an endless war against literature in the name of literature’s own requirements. “The appeal of classical art,” Valéry wrote in *Rhumbs*, “may well consist in the series of transformations it calls for, if things are to be expressed in conformity with the sine qua non conditions imposed on the author.”<sup>2</sup> This formulation seems quite close to Proust’s. But there is between them a small difference in which the entire question of what we understand by literature is at stake. Valéry’s reference to “classical art” sets an abyss across the Proustian path from impression to

expression. The virtue proper to classical art was the line by which an “idea” distanced itself in order to become song. “Racine proceeds by very subtle modulations of the idea he has taken as his theme. He lures it into consonance with the melody he is aiming at.”<sup>3</sup> For Valéry this classical virtue represents two things at once. It is both the continuous line of a discourse in which the idea becomes song and also the curve or detour that a system of rules imposes upon the desire for expression. The very arbitrariness of binding rules teaches the poet to take a distance from what he takes to be his “thought,” the very thing he wants to express. It thus leads him to discover, in the exteriority of song, the authentic possibilities of thought that are repressed by the desire to “express” it. The classical “series of transformations,” which combines the continuity of discourse with the coercion of rules, fulfills the power of thought proper to art by repressing the false seriousness of thought and the illusory consistency of history.

But this literary classicism, this classicism of a literature reduced to its true principle—the poetic principle of exact and undefinable harmony between meaning and sound—appears as a thing of the past. The relation of this past to the present, moreover, can be given an exact definition: It opposes a time of speech as action to the time of writing.

For a very long time the human voice was basic to all “literature.” This presence of the voice explains the earliest literature out of which classical literature built up its form and its admirable “temperament.” The whole human body was present *under* the voice, upholding and ensuring the equilibrium of the “idea.”

There came a day when men had learned to read with the eyes, without hearing, without spelling out the words, and then the whole nature of literature was transformed.

Here began a transition from articulating to skimming—from the scanned and the flowing to the instantaneous—from what a group of listeners accepts and demands to what a swift and eager eye, roving freely over a page, can cope with and taken in.<sup>4</sup>

This page from *Odds and Ends* has several remarkable features. It defines the golden age of literature as the time when “literature” in the modern sense did not exist: the time of creators who were not men of letters, the time dear to Voltaire when Corneille’s speeches were addressed to Lamoignon, Molé, and Retz rather than to “a certain number of young men and young women.” That age fled with the coming of the reign of writing. “The whole nature of literature was transformed.” Literature became, in short, its own transformation, the

impossibility of a higher-level coincidence between the line of discourse along which thought escapes itself and the line of song. Despite his anti-philosophical stance, Valéry has taken a Hegelian position here. Like Hegel, he constructs a Romantic classicism in which the union of signifying thought and sensuous form occurs at a point of equilibrium between the realization of an intention and an inert resistance, which for Valéry is provided by the rules. Both of them see this “classical” union of meaning and sensuousness rejected into a now inaccessible past. The body of this union—plastic figuration for Hegel, the voice in tragic music for Valéry—has been withdrawn. The classical union of the will to expression and the arbitrariness of the rule was characteristic of a world that itself was sufficiently arbitrary and obscure for the artist to believe himself called upon to give it order and to see fiction as capable of playing this role. But the world of science, in which every fragment scribbled on a piece of paper takes on meaning in connection with the great universal mechanism, no longer needs such order, and the labor of creating a work denounces itself as the production of counterfeits.<sup>5</sup> The labor of thought exploring its unsuspected potentialities in literature can no longer be satisfied with the form of the work that restricts these possibilities for the benefit of fiction’s “puppets” and that will be lost, like the mute letter, among “the indeterminate mass of possible readers.” For thought, literary work in the usual sense “can only be a sub-product, an application or an exercise belonging to a deeper and more important piece of work, which aims to act upon oneself far more than other individuals.”<sup>6</sup> Literature’s authentic power, a power that is opposed to the naivety of the “expression” of thought and narrative reporting, now turns toward the condition of literature and the direct exploration of the potentialities of thought.

Valéry’s dilemma thus reproduces Hegel’s. Both separate ages in which thought and sensuous matter harmonized in a sensuous figure and ages in which they can no longer do so and thought turns back upon itself. There is of course a difference in the figure of “itself,” as there is in the figure of sensuous harmony. But what is important is the use Valéry, in producing a different version of the Hegelian schema, makes of the principles of the art that in Hegel’s account was opposed to the closure of the “death of art.” Valéry radicalizes the symbolist paradigm of music and the Mallarméan idea of poetic thought as a “fresh beginning of the conditions and materials of thought.” He learned from Mallarmé—both from his teaching and from his failure—to conceive and value *above all written* works the conscious possession of the function of language and the sense of having a superior liberty of expression, in the light of which any thought is only an incident, a particular event.”<sup>7</sup> This attitude is not merely the expression of the lesson one individual has drawn from his relationship with

another. It manifests the reversal of an idea of literature, of the fundamentalist version of Romantic poetics, the version that desires literature to be coherent and to rest upon a single principle. Undermined by the work's compromises and contradictions, coherence emigrates to the land of possibility, to the point where its thought springs forth. But this point is also where the two great figures of the disappearance of the work are to be found: Artaud's "madness," the "literary existence" that is a testimony to impossibility, and Valéry's lucidity, the direct exploration of the powers of thought that refuses to be limited within a work. In both cases it is pure possibility or impossibility that, in opposition to the work, makes manifest the radicality of literature's spirit. Literary specificity becomes a negative relation to itself, the movement that pushes it to suppress itself to the benefit of its own question. "Suspicion" with respect to literature and the withdrawal of the work before a more fundamental "unworking [*désœuvrement*]" were not born in the 1940s from historical trauma or the political demystification of the functions of discourse. They belong to the system of reasons that make "literature," since the Romantic revolution, the name given to the productions of the art of writing.

We can now see what is at stake in the little difference that separates similar sentences by Proust and Valéry. What separates Proust from Valéry is not the willingness to write, "The marquise went out at five o'clock," but the willingness to accept the contradictions of Romantic poetics that make literature what it is. Like Hegel, Valéry draws a dividing line. There is the time of the speaking body and the time of writing, the time of rules that push thought toward song and the time of freedom that leads the labor of the work back to the exploration of the potentialities of thought. To this end he constructs an economical classicism in which the constraints of the generic and representative system are erased in favor of the rules of rhythmic measure alone and poetry becomes a pure relation of thought to time. He short-circuits the passage between representative poetics and expressive poetics, the impasses of symbolism, the chiasmus between *seeing* and *saying*, the quarrel over the "poetry of poetry" and the war between writings. This was the price that had to be paid to separate the poetic principle from the "idols" of literature. But at this cost literature itself confirms philosophy's judgment as to its closure. It recognizes itself as a past mode of thought.

Proust takes the opposite tack. He takes up residence at the heart of the contradiction between literature's principles: the contradiction between the book that is entirely constructed and whose form is as free as the author's will, and the collection of hieroglyphs that preserve the impressions left on the author's mind by the alliterations of things; the inconsistency of the impression in which nothing is printed and whose transformation changes nothing, being the pure

labor of a metaphor. For the crucial step is not to write, “The marquise went out at five o’clock,” but to write that a napkin “unfolded for me—concealed within its smooth surfaces and its folds—the plumage of an ocean green and blue like the tail of a peacock.” It is not to link together two insignificant events in the life of a fictional puppet, but to link in a single sentence two poetics: the poetics of the narration of events and that of the unfolding of symbols. The white napkin that is transformed into a foamy wave and the green and blue tail of a peacock breaks the line—the dream of a line—that would lead thought to song by the sole movement of temporality. The dubious metaphor that assimilates the linking of the two terms of a metaphor to the linking of phenomena under a law finds a rigorous meaning here. Against the musicians of the sentence, Proust obstinately recalls that it is the transfer of the power of narrative into the power of metaphor that overturned belles-lettres and gave rise to literature. Literature depends on very little indeed. It consists in the first place in the movement that transformed discursive ornamentation into a hieroglyph of the power of language: inner book, alliteration of things, microcosm of the world-poem. This sentence, a microcosm of the *Remembrance*, like the *Remembrance* as a whole that develops its principle, recapitulates the movement through which literature comes to exist. To bring forth from the touch of a napkin an inner life that is the same thing as a written book is certainly a “myth” of the book. But, precisely, the metaphor-sentence and the book that identifies the development of a story with the development of a metaphor transform the myth of the alliterations of things and the book written within us into a reality. The book is the extended metaphor that unfolds the imaginary properties of another book that *would have written itself*. Thus the contradictory poetics of literature is fulfilled in a work, bringing into the work the logics that bear the letter away toward its spirit or bear literature away toward the consideration of its place of origin. It does so at the cost of accepting the infinite shuttle between the constructed book and the printed book, between the plot of discovery and revealed truth. The labor of metaphor unites and separates contradictory poetics, bringing to completion the hazardous journey from its own myth (the book of life’s hieroglyphs in which are inscribed the alliterations of things) to its literal reality—this problematic comparison between the folds of a napkin and the foamy rolling of the waves and between the wave and the curve of a peacock’s tail—which is always caught between the risks of showing too much and failing to show what it says.

But literature also depends upon the contradiction of the writing that deposits the active speech of the representative and rhetorical universe. This writing is itself riven between two poles: on the one hand, the book of the symbols of the poeticity of the world, of the spiritual life or the sensuous inner world; on the

other, naked writing, the mute and loquacious speech that rolls around left and right, dependent upon the wavering attention unqualified readers pay to the printed page, at the mercy of what that attention draws from the page and the chain of words and images in which it is translated. Proust submits himself to this paradox as well. He must win the autonomy of the work from the aestheticism that dissolves it in the pleasures and illusions of life. But this autonomy must be lost again and handed over to a reader for whom the book's calculated construction will be dissolved in the sensation of a childhood morning, a hot afternoon, a foamy wave or a scent of lilac. The book must go dig a mental "furrow" in other people; otherwise it remains a lifeless set of annotations. But this amounts not only to saying that the beautiful closure of the work must be lost for the book to speak, but also that the "spiritual life" that gives the book life is itself linked to the chance circulation of the letter. There is no other spiritual life, no other kingdom of works but the infinite flow of ink over the surface of the page, than the incorporeal body of the wandering letter that goes off to speak to the faceless multitude of readers of books. The book as a "child of silence" has no universe other than the endless chatter of mute writing. This is the cost of the work.

One can, of course, refuse to pay this price. We are not seeking here to decide whether it is better to refuse the work's compromises or to agree to them. The point is rather to show how both positions derive from the logic of the specific mode of visibility of works of the art of writing that is called "literature." Literature is the system of possibilities that determines the impossible agreement of the necessity of language with the indifference to what it says, of the great writing of living spirit with the democracy of the naked letter. It is pointless to attempt to distinguish, within this historical system of reasons, between the solid reality of works and supposedly external and parasitical discourses about their possibility or impossibility. There have only existed works in whose name parasitical discourses about them can be dismissed since those discourses themselves have existed. One and the same Romantic poetics proclaimed the autonomous value of works, their character as testimony to the poem of language or humanity, and their capacity of speak about themselves. The work's distance from itself, its reference to what is beneath or beyond it, is in fact an essential component of the definition of its autonomy. This system is assuredly, when taken with rigor, contradictory. But it also defines a range of gradients that allow works to be made from this poetics. The destruction of the generic system subjects literature to the play of opposites but also authorizes passages between incompatible functions and the articulation of opposed poetics. It turns literature into an ambiguous stage on which two anti-genres, the novel and the essay,

double, oppose, or intertwine with one another, mixing or reversing the properties of the work and discourse about the work: the play of fiction, the myths that raise it to absolute value, and the critical discourses that reveal its machinery. If Proust's work—like that of Joyce, who did not appreciate Proust any more than Proust appreciated him—is exemplary, it is on account of its ability to set a fiction, a critical discourse, and a myth concerning it within a single framework, to hold together within the form of a work the centrifugal forces and drives toward disjunction, unworking, or suspicion inherent in the contradiction between literature's principles.

These exemplary works underline the singular position literature occupies in the system of the arts during the aesthetic age. In the great revolution that had enthroned aesthetics in the place of poetics, the art of writing had been situated in the most exposed position. Even the displacement from the primacy of story to the primacy of language worked against it. This primacy in fact operated in favor of an expansion of the very idea of language. This expansion conferred linguistic dignity not only on the more prestigious sensuous powers of color and music or the most eloquent forms taken by stone under the hands of both artist and time. It also drew a contrast between the great hieroglyphic poem inscribed upon the very flesh of things or in the depths of thought and the weaker resources of sentences printed on paper. The great multiplication of languages, in the Romantic age, makes the most modest of stones speak. In the time of Kandinsky, it will grant the expression of “spirituality” to the abstract traits of color. For Vertov or Epstein, it will valorize the truthful eye of the camera and the plastic combination of moving images in opposition to worn-out literary representation.

The art of writing seems to be caught between the language of forms and things on the one side and the signs of thought on the other. In Hegel's teleology of the arts, poetry was not only the last Romantic art but also the “general art”—in which generality was affirmed at the expense of art. By dematerializing the language of forms poetry subtracted its own capacity from itself. It led the forms of art to become the signs of thought. Between the incarnate language of forms and the instrumental signs of thought, nothing was left except for the equivocations of the symbol. All the effort of literature's militants had been to revoke this verdict and give literature the sensuous form of thought. The art of writing had never ceased to suffer from the coercive force of this verdict through the contradictions it encountered. The form proper to literary thought had to be the “silent” imitation of the mute language of music or dance, the imaginary projection of the rhythms of thought or the mythical transcription of the discourse of things inscribed in the hieroglyphs of inner life. In the great liberation that

proclaimed the general advent of an art freed from the necessity to represent, the art of writing seemed condemned to the choice between being the last art of the past and being the discourse that stated what only the others were capable of doing. Once more, what can the infelicitous metaphor of a peacock's tail do on a written page in comparison with its model, the art of a painter who inverts earth and sea? What can it do in comparison with the dissociations, superimpositions, and pirouettes of sound and image that magnify the powers of forms to manifest and signify?

And yet, strangely, it is writing's poverty that accounts for literature's capacity for resistance. The weakness of the means at its disposal to measure up to its glorious image as the language among languages is what taught it to tame the myths and suspicions that separated it from itself, to invent the fictions and metaphors of a skeptical art in the strict sense of the term: an art that investigates itself, that makes fictions from this investigation, that plays with its myths, challenges its philosophy, and challenges itself in the name of this philosophy. The inconsistent art of literature has in the end been more capable than the others of resisting what our contemporaries call the "crisis of art." For what is this so-called "crisis of art" if not the inability of certain arts—more precisely the plastic arts with their too great wealth of means—to become skeptical, to fictionalize their limits and their hyperboles? A non-skeptical art is an art that is subject to the burden of its own "thought" and is obliged to pursue the interminable task of manifesting this thought and demonstrating itself until it reaches its own suppression. It is an art that cannot live off of its own contradiction because it never encounters its contradiction. Such is the both felicitous and infelicitous fate of the arts of the visible. They were the best endowed in the aesthetic configuration of the arts, the most apt to unite the two contradictory principles of Romantic poetics: the principle that proclaims the absolute character of style, seizing hold of every subject and every material, and the principle that affirms the universality of the doubling by which every thing becomes language. Every matter is poetic provided that one of its properties can stand for the mark of writing, the hieroglyph by which it presents itself. Every form is artistic provided that it can stand as the manifestation of pure artistic intention. An infinity of possibilities for the arts of the visible opened at the point where these two principles meet. Today we are told they have become the domain of "anything whatever." But what is the "anything whatever" thus bemoaned if not the "everything is possible" that the aesthetic age granted to the arts of the visible: the coincidence between the trace of history, the sign of writing, and the mark of the will to art? The arts of the visible have lived off the dual principle of Romantic aesthetics that allows every object to be art twice: once because it was willed

as a manifestation of art and again because it manifests the doubling by which everything signifies itself. If the functional diversion and topical displacement of the *ready-made* met with such conceptual success it is because they accomplish the exact correspondence of these two principles. They allegorize quite precisely the good fortune of an art that identifies itself as the re-presentation of all things, the re-presentation of the same as other, in which is realized the pre-established harmony between artistic intention and the twofold body of the thing, both sensuous and signifying. The problem is that an art that is assured of always making art ends up only being able to manifest its intention, although at the cost of making this manifestation a self-denunciation. Between the grandiloquence of self-promotion and that of self-denunciation, an art has little chance to forge a capacity for skepticism.

Literature, having been less fortunate, has also had less misfortune. Neither its object nor its intention have ever served it as a guarantee. This is the sense of Flaubert's endless anxiety: a tiny deviation in the sentence and you end up with Paul de Kock. It is also the sense of Proust's proud declaration: in the last judgment of art, intentions don't count. Literature has the misfortune of speaking only in words—that is, speaking the same language as intentions, and thus having to make the work both the realization and the refutation of its intention. It has the misfortune to have only the language of written words at its disposal to stage myths of a writing beyond writing, everywhere inscribed in the flesh of things. This misfortune obliges it to the skeptical fortune of words that make believe they are more than words and critique this claim themselves. Thus the flow of undifferentiated and democratic ink, in staging the war between writings, has paradoxically become the refuge of art's consistency.



# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

1. I would like to express my gratitude to all of the friends and colleagues who provided feedback on earlier versions of this introduction. Solange Guénoun deserves particular mention for her insightful comments and critical acumen, as well as Bruno Bosteels, Todd May, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Jacques Rancière, and James Swenson.
2. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 1, *The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 317–318 and 330 / *Histoire du structuralisme, I. Le champ du signe, 1945–1966* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), 370 and 384.
3. To avoid the unnecessary proliferation of quotation marks, let it be stated here, once and for all, that the following categories are recognized to be fundamentally problematic and are only used as heuristic abbreviations to index general spans of time: modernism, modernity, the modernists, the modern age, modern art, classicism, the classical age, classical art, postmodernism, the postmodern era, etc.
4. “Foreword,” in Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), ix.
5. Of course, this “irony of history” does not suggest in the least that the discrete reception of Rancière’s book somehow confirms his historiographical theses (which would be an absurdity).
6. In anticipation of Rancière’s position on these matters, see *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 176: “The end of the logic of verisimilitude [*vraisemblance*] is not the rule of free fiction; it is, on the

contrary, the end of this ‘freedom,’ the end of the principle of a separation between fiction and history. [...] This regime [the new regime of truth proper to literature] does not get rid of the system of verisimilitude for the sake of free invention. It gets rid of the framework within which verisimilitudes functioned” (all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated).

7. “The Modesty of History” in *A Personal Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 179.
8. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum Books, 2006), 24.
9. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués: Entretiens* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2009), 207–208.
10. Jean-Clet Martin, Raymond Bellour, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, “Autour de *La parole muette* de Jacques Rancière,” *Horlieu-(X)* 18 (2000): 74.
11. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 259. Among the numerous other instances where Rancière emphasizes his desire to jettison the modernist doxa, see the chapter “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (20–30), *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* (158, 475, 586), and *Politique de la littérature* (13). To cite one last example, in a recent interview that I participated in, he claims that his writings on artists attempt to displace the framework of modernism, avant-gardism, formalism, the unrepresentable and committed art (see “Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence” (Interview with Gabriel Rockhill and Alexi Kukuljevic, *Machete* 1:3 (December 2009): <http://www.marginalutility.org/machete-group/zines/2009/machete-zines-december-2009/>)).
12. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 28 (also see 52).
13. Rancière also critically discusses what he calls the “next episode” in postmodernism, which he largely identifies with Jean-François Lyotard’s reinterpretation of the Kantian sublime as the “scene of a founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation”: “Postmodernism thus became the grand threnody of the unrepresentable/intractable/irredeemable, denouncing the modern madness of the idea of a self-emancipation of mankind’s humanity and its inevitable and interminable culmination in the death camps” (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 28, 29, 29). For his full critique of Lyotard’s conceptualization of the unrepresentable, see *Le destin des images* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2003), 123–153 and *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 119–141.
14. It is important to note that Rancière explicitly rejects historicism, or what I would call, more specifically, *reductive historicism*, i.e., “the discourse that identifies an empirical moment of time with a conceptual system of possibles, that tells us that, at such a time and in such an age, certain things must be thought, other things are unthinkable” (*Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 140). Also see “Autour de *La parole muette*,” 84: “The recourse to history is, in my work, anti-historicist. It aims at eliminating any historicist and destinal pathos that would link literature to founding events or onto-theological determinations of ‘modernity.’”
15. It remains a moot question whether or not this is the case for all of the concepts invoked in this study, as we will see later.
16. “Literature,” he writes in *Politique de la littérature*, “is not a transhistorical term designating all of the productions of the arts of speech and writing. It is only as of late that

- the word has taken on this meaning, which today has become commonplace” (12). Similar arguments regarding the historicity of art and literature have been decisively formulated in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) and Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
17. In a revealing statement during his exchange with Alain Badiou in “Autour de *La parole muette*,” Rancière accuses the latter of maintaining the position of Althusserian Marxism, which separates “what people do from what they say they are doing” (97). It is precisely this position that Rancière repudiates.
  18. Rancière defines a regime in the following terms: “A regime of art is a system of coordination [*système de concordance*] between artists’ ways of doing and making [*manières de faire*], modes of perception, and the forms that allow what they are doing or making to be thought [*les formes de pensabilité de ce qu’ils font*]” (*Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 255).
  19. For reasons of concision and in order to situate *Mute Speech* in relationship to Rancière’s corpus as a whole, I have decided—at times—to use the vocabulary of *regimes* in spite of the fact that the book itself talks about *poetics* and *systems*, or refers to the differences between representation and expression, the *belles lettres* and literature, etc. I take it that the *representative regime of arts* and the *aesthetic regime of art* are synthetic labels for the two rival poetics described in *Mute Speech*. Indeed, in “Autour de *La parole muette*,” published in 2000 but based on a public discussion organized at the Collège International de Philosophie in December 1999, Rancière suggests that literature, as it was described in *Mute Speech*, is situated within the “aesthetic regime of art” (98). It is worth noting in passing that Rancière began using the vocabulary of the “aesthetic regime of art” in his seminar at the Collège International de Philosophie as of at least the fall of 1997.
  20. I have critically explored this issue in “Démocratie moderne et révolution esthétique. Quelques réflexions sur la causalité historique,” in *La philosophie déplacée: Autour de Jacques Rancière*, eds. Laurence Cornu and Patrice Vermeren (Paris: Horlieu, 2006), 335–349. An extended version of this article is forthcoming in my book, *Pour un historicisme radical: Entre esthétique et politique avec Rancière*.
  21. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 476.
  22. *Ibid.*, 434.
  23. In the discussion, “Autour de *La parole muette*,” Rancière asserts that when the system of representation is destroyed, “we can say that the Platonic background [*le fond platonicien*] comes once again to the fore: writing as a mode of illegitimate speech [*la parole illégitime*], as a form of distribution of the sensible” (85). Indeed, he states in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: “The nineteenth century was haunted—negatively—by the Platonic paradigm of the democratic dissolution of the social body” (57).
  24. On the role of Plato in *Mute Speech*, and more generally the complex relationship between history and conceptualization, see Raymond Bellour’s insightful contribution to the discussion “Autour de *La parole muette*,” 76–83.
  25. On the translatability or transformation between the other two regimes, see *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (London: Polity Press, 2010).

26. This also seems to be the case for literarity, the novel and the “democratic letter.” In fact, this is one of the points at which we approach the limits of radical historicism since certain key concepts and practices, for Rancière, seem to transcend the various “poetics” or artistic regimes.
27. For a poignant example, see André Robinet’s analysis of Augustine in *Le langage à l’âge classique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978).
28. I have had the opportunity to critically examine and debunk the supposedly transhistorical role played by Plato in the history of the West. See my book *Logique de l’histoire. Pour une analytique des pratiques philosophiques* (Paris: Hermann, 2010), 51–192.
29. *Effective* is here understood in the sense of *wirklich*. Regarding this issue, Raymond Bellour appropriately underscores the possibility that in *Mute Speech* “the synchrony of philosophic concepts impressed itself on the diachrony of literary realities” (“Autour de *La parole muette*,” 81).
30. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 437.
31. Quoted in Lewis White Beck’s Introduction to Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck, trans. Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor and Emil L. Fackenheim (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), vii. It would, of course, be a serious mistake to presume that Kant simply wanted to do away with empirical history: “That I would want to displace the work of practicing empirical historians with this Idea of world history, which is to some extent based upon an a priori principle, would be a misinterpretation of my intention. It is only a suggestion of what a philosophical mind (which would have to be well versed in history) could essay from another point of view” (“Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” in *On History*, 25).
32. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 475.
33. I explore these and many related issues in *Pour un historicisme radical*.
34. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 21.
35. *Ibid.*, 21.
36. I have in mind here the work of the *belles infidèles* in the seventeenth century, who unabashedly adapted *les anciens* to the poetic norms of *les modernes* and often changed the vocabulary, stylistics, and organization of the original work.
37. Rancière is fond of referring to Flaubert’s correspondence and his preoccupation, for instance, with writing a book on nothing: “Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air, un livre qui n’aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut. Les œuvres les plus belles sont celles où il y a le moins de matière; plus l’expression se rapproche de la pensée, plus le mot colle dessus et disparaît, plus c’est beau” (Lettre à Louise Colet, 16 January 1852, *Correspondance*, présentation de Bernard Masson, Gallimard, 1998, 156)
38. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22–23.
39. *Ibid.*, 23.
40. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 226.

41. Before examining the positive contradiction of literature, let us briefly consider the extreme example of film (which is ultimately a consequence of the contradiction that is literature). According to Rancière's account, cinema is a double art, caught between certain dictates of the representative and the aesthetic regimes. On the one hand, film has only been able to develop and become visible as an art within the aesthetic regime because it is an art of the commonplace in which the conscious eye of the cameraman melds with the unconscious eye of a machine. On the other hand, it has repeatedly attempted to reinscribe this contradictory sensible order into causal chains of meaning, into representations. The history of film, for Rancière, is thereby caught in a double bind between the aesthetic logic of the mute writing of things and the narrative logic of hierarchy, causality and fables. This is one of the reasons he rejects the various arguments in favor of cinematic modernity: "film seems to come about with the explicit intention of contradicting a simple teleology of artistic modernity opposing the aesthetic autonomy of art to its former submission to representation" (*Film Fables*, trans. Emilio Battista. Oxford: Berg, 2006, 10 / *La fable cinématographique*. Paris: éditions du Seuil, 2001, 17, translation slightly modified). On the unique status of cinema in the history of the arts, see *Film Fables; The Politics of Aesthetics*, 31–34; and the interviews on film in *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* (particularly 226–227 and 485).
42. Rancière has provided one of the clearest formulations of this contradiction in "Autour de *La parole muette*." According to the principle of indifference, "there is no link between a subject matter and a mode of writing," whereas for the principle of necessity, there is a "necessary relationship of a form and a content" (73; 74).
43. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 438.
44. In addition to *Mute Speech*, see *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 438.
45. *Politique de la littérature*, 49.
46. This is one of the reasons why the new idea of literature was promulgated by the advocates of a third way between the Jacobin revolution and the aristocratic revolution, the path of a political order based on freedom in the development of societies and civilizations.
47. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 267.
48. To avoid undue confusion, it is worth noting that the principle of necessity applies both to language in general and to the work itself, while the principle of indifference refers both to the indifference of style and the indifference of content.
49. Raymond Bellour touches on this point in "Autour de *La parole muette*" and also raises other important questions concerning Rancière's exemplary authors and inevitable exclusions as well as his privileging of the novel over the poem in the traditional sense (see Rancière's reply in the same text).
50. Rancière provides a very brief but informative justification in his response to Bellour in "Autour de *La parole muette*" (see 86). While he recognizes the drawbacks of working on a homogenous literary corpus, he underscores the fact that it allows for a more rigorous determination of continuities and breaks because the authors have a common set of references, read one another, are sometimes in dialogue with one another, etc.

51. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Sartre répond” in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* (1966, 15 October): 4.
52. See, for instance, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 561–562: “the world of the *belles-lettres* was a world clearly in analogy with a sociopolitical world that was hierarchical: the hierarchy of genres was here the hierarchy of noble and lowly subjects; expression was guided by a principle of decorum that gave each person the language suitable for his or her condition; poetycity itself was defined as the elaboration of an action, that is to say, it was referred to a hierarchy between the men who act and those who simply live; the supreme model of speech was given by the speech that becomes act [*la parole qui fait acte*], the speech supported by a position of authority. [...] The literary revolution is the destruction of this edifice.” Also see *ibid.*, 64. “Literature, such as the concept of it emerges in the nineteenth century, is the art of speech without a place or a norm other than the common force of language [*la puissance commune de la langue*]. In this, literature is homogenous with the disorder of speaking beings characteristic of the democratic age.”
53. *Ibid.*, 584.
54. In addition to *Politique de la littérature*, see “The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 49–66.
55. In the interview I conducted with Rancière for *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he fervently downplayed the opposition between body and spirit—which is undeniably a central element in *Mute Speech*—in favor of the distinction between incorporation and disincorporation. This is probably due to various criticisms of his work, such as Henri Meschonnic’s piercing critique in which he claimed that Rancière had the “incarnation of the word” like “a communion wafer in his mouth [*une hostie à la bouche*]” (“Libérez Mallarmé,” *Magazine littéraire* (September 1998). I do not find Rancière’s change in vocabulary convincing because it appears to be nothing more than a very minor reworking of the opposition between body and spirit: *incorporation* corresponds to the unity of body and spirit, whereas *disincorporation* refers to the disunity between body and spirit, i.e. to a body without spirit (see *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 56–58).
56. This, of course, partially goes against the reading of Rancière that I have been promoting here. This is because I recognize that there are nonetheless certain elements in his work that are disturbingly close—too close for my tastes—to the classic division between classicism and modernism.
57. It is revealing in this regard that Rancière replied to my question of whether or not there are authors in the nineteenth century who escape the negative dialectic of incorporation and disincorporation with a concise “undoubtedly,” but then went on to illustrate how non-French authors of the twentieth century are ensnared in the exact same “positive contradiction” as nineteenth-century French writers (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 59).
58. I have examined in detail the case of the supposed birth of film in “Le cinéma n'est jamais né” in *Lemilieu des appareils*, ed. Jean-Louis Déotte (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), 187–211 (also forthcoming in *Pour un historicisme radical*).
59. It is worth noting that Rancière himself insisted on the importance of institutional analysis in *La leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), notably 250–251.

60. *La fin de l'intériorité: Théorie de l'expression et invention esthétique dans les avant-gardes françaises* (1885–1935) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 8–11.
61. See *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 436, for Rancière's response.

## INTRODUCTION: FROM ONE LITERATURE TO ANOTHER

1. Gérard Genette. *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1.
2. John Searle. *Meaning and Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 59.
3. Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, 19.
4. The sense of the quotation marks around “literature” thus established, we will henceforth spare the reader their repetition.
5. Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet], “Littérature,” *Dictionnaire philosophique*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1827), vol. 10, 174.
6. Maurice Blanchot. *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 219–220.
7. See Marc Fumaroli, *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et “res literaria” de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).
8. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, 175.
9. See Charles Batteux, *A Course of the Belles Lettres, or the Principles of Literature* (London: B. Law, 1761), vol. 1, 5–26; Jean-François de La Harpe, *Lycée ou Cours de littérature* (Paris, 1840), vol. 1, 7–15. Hugo calls Batteux an “old dunce [*vieux cancre*]” in the poem “Littérature,” in *Les quatre vents de l'esprit*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1968), vol. 9, 619.
10. See Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël, *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (London: Henry Colburn, 1812 [1801]), and *Germany* (London: John Murray, 1813); Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*, trans. Thomas Roscoe (London: Henry Bohn, 1846 [1813]); Amable-Guillaume-Prosper Brugière, baron de Barante, *A Tableau of French Literature during the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1833 [1814]); August Wilhelm Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black and A. J. W. Morrison (London: Henry Bohn, 1846 [1814]).
11. For the development of the various arguments synthesized here, see in particular the critical analyses of Tzvetan Todorov, *Literature and Its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); or, from a completely different perspective, Henri Meschonnic, *Poésie sans réponse: pour la poétique V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
12. All three authors are French: This book has no claim of encyclopedic scope. Nor, however, is its goal to analyze a French specificity in the elaboration of the norms of *Belles-Lettres* or of the ideals of literature. It advances a few hypotheses and seeks to test them with respect to a relatively homogeneous historical sequence and sphere of reference.

## CHAPTER 1: FROM REPRESENTATION TO EXPRESSION

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 139.
2. Charles de Rémusat, *Passé et présent* (1847), cited by Armand de Pontmartin, “De l'esprit littéraire en 1858,” in *Nouvelles causeries du samedi* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1859), 4; Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, “Gustave Flaubert,” *Le roman contemporain, in XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: les œuvres et les hommes* (Paris: Lemerre, 1902), vol. 18, p. 103; Léon Bloy, *Belluaires et porchers* (Paris: Stock, 1905), 96–97.
3. Gustave Planche, “Poètes et romanciers modernes de la France: M. Victor Hugo,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1838), vol. 1, 757.
4. Charles Batteux, *A Course of the Belles Letters, or the Principles of Literature* (London: B. Law, 1761), vol. 1, 110.
5. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Geneva: The Voltaire Foundation, 1975), vol. 55, 465, 976, 964, 965, 731.
6. Batteux, *Course of Belles Letters*, vol. 1, 157.
7. Jean-François de La Harpe, *Lycée ou Cours de littérature* (Paris, 1840), vol. 1, 476.
8. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille*, vol. 55, 830–831.
9. Batteux, *Course of Belles Letters*, vol. 1, 111.
10. Marc Fumaroli, *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria" de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), 30.
11. La Harpe, *Lycée*, vol. 1, 198.
12. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).
13. Flaubert to Louise Colet, January 16, 1852, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830–1857*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 154.

## CHAPTER 2: FROM THE BOOK OF STONE TO THE BOOK OF LIFE

1. C.D., “*Notre-Dame de Paris*, par M. Victor Hugo,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1831), vol. 1, 188.
2. “I hope that we will eventually put nothing but the author's name on the cover of a book” (Émile Deschamps, “M. de Balzac,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1831), vol. 4, 314–315).
3. Victor Hugo, *Le Rhin*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1968), vol. 4, 253.
4. Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Traité de l'origine des romans* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), 28–29.
5. Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, trans. David Marsh (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), 157.
6. Ibid., 96, 162.
7. Edgar Quinet, *Allemagne et Italie: philosophie et poésie* (Paris: Desforges, 1839), vol. 2, 97–98.
8. A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst*, in *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. Ernst Behler and Frank Jolles (Paderborn: Schönigh, 1989), vol. 1, 388.

9. Ibid., vol. 1, 250.
10. Cf. Théodore Jouffroy, *Cours d'esthétique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1863), 220: “The stone does not say much because its elementary signs are not sufficiently prominent; it is a scribbled, poorly written word.”
11. See Novalis [Georg Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, trans. David W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 24: “It is not only man that speaks—the universe also speaks—everything speaks—infinite languages. / Theory of signatures.”
12. Proust particularly emphasizes the theme of the alliterations of things with respect to the transparent carafes that children set in the Vivonne to catch fish, so that “one no longer knows whether the river is a crystal carafe or if the carafe is frozen liquid.” Text drawn from notebook 4, printed in *Cahiers Marcel Proust* 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 165; compare Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), vol. 1, 183–184 [where *allitération perpétuelle* is rendered as “perpetually in flight”].

## CHAPTER 3: THE BOOK OF LIFE AND THE EXPRESSION OF SOCIETY

1. Novalis [Georg Friedrich von Hardenberg], “Monologue,” in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, ed. David Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 274.
2. Ibid.
3. Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*, trans. Thomas Roscoe (London: Henry Bohn, 1846 [1813]), vol. 2, 25.
4. Théodore Jouffroy, *Cours d'esthétique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1863), 199.
5. Zola was clearly conscious of this on at least one occasion, when, accusing his naturalism of having often substituted the enchanted nature of romanticism for scientific “nature,” he gives his own interpretation of the “petrification” inherent in the literary project:

Now it is certain that we rarely hold ourselves to this scientific rigor. All reaction is violent, and we shall react still against the abstract formula of the last centuries. Nature has entered into our works with so impetuous a bound that it has filled them, sometimes swamping the human element, submerging and carrying away characters in the midst of a downfall of rocks and great trees. [...]

We dream of all kinds of folly, we write books in which the springs commence to sing, the oaks to talk with each other, the rocks to sigh and palpitate like a woman overcome with the midday heat. And there are symphonies in the leaves, roles given to the blades of grass, poems on light and on odors. If there is any excuse to be offered for such digressions it is because we have dreamed of broadening humanity, and that we have imbued even the stones in the roadways with it

(Emile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman [New York: Cassell, 1893], 233–236).

6. Honoré de Balzac, Introduction, *The Works of Honoré de Balzac*, ed. George Saintsbury (Freeport, NY: Books for Librairies Press, 1971 [reprint of 1901 edition]), vol. 1, 3, 5.
7. See François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, book 13, ch. 11 (translation by A. S. Kline available online at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineas-chateaubriand.htm>): “The literature that expresses the new era has only held sway for forty or fifty years from the moment whose idiom it became [...]. It was Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Lemercier, Bonald, and, finally, I who first spoke that language. The changes in literature, which the nineteenth century boasted of, arose from emigration and exile.”
8. Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), vol. 1, 196–197.
9. Amable-Guillaume-Prosper Brugière, Baron de Barante, *A Tableau of French Literature during the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1833 [1814]), xv–xvi.
10. François Guizot, *Shakespeare and His Times* (New York: Harper, 1852), 155.
11. Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *A History of English Literature*, trans. Henri van Laun (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), vol. 1, 1–2, 5.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé to Eugène Lefébure, June 30, 1865, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), vol. 1, 170.
13. Marcel Proust, manuscript fragment from notebook 26, cited by Bernard Brun, “Une des lois vraiment immuables de ma vie spirituelle: quelques éléments de la démonstration proustienne dans les brouillons de *Swann*,” *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes* 10 (1979), 27.
14. Jean-Jacques Ampère, “De l'histoire de la littérature française,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1834), vol. 4, 409, 415.

## CHAPTER 4: FROM THE POETRY OF THE FUTURE TO THE POETRY OF THE PAST

1. Novalis [Georg Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, trans. David W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 132 [translation modified].
2. Ibid., xxii. On nature as poem, see the final chapter of F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, ed. David Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 225–232 [citation from p. 228], to which A. W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst* refer; and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 93.
3. Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 170.
4. Ibid., 164. We should note that this is a rare instance of a text by Schlegel that gives even an indirect definition of the notion of the fragment. It should be compared with

- fragment 77: “But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in the system of all the sciences” (170, italics added).
5. Ibid., fragment 116, 175.
  6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1045.
  7. Ibid., 1052–1053.
  8. Ibid., 1049.
  9. Ibid., 261.
  10. “Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism,” *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 185–187.
  11. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1092 (translation modified).
  12. Friedrich Schlegel, “On Goethe’s *Meister*,” in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. Bernstein, 269–286.
  13. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 593.
  14. Jean Paul, “Einige *Jus de tablette* für Mannspersonen,” Appendix to *Leben des Quintus Fixlein*, in *Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1962), vol. 4, 203.

## CHAPTER 5: THE BOOK IN PIECES

1. Proust, *Time Regained*, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmarin (New York: Vintage, 1982), vol. 3, 876, 914.
2. For details of this lineage, see William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).
3. Let us take as an example, both because it summarizes so many others and because Proust found it particularly touching, the discovery made by the young shepherdess Marie-Claire in the garret at the farm: “The only thing I found was a little book without any cover. The corners of the leaves were rolled up as if it had been carried about in somebody’s pocket for a long time. The first two pages were missing, and the third page was so dirty that I could not read the print. I took it under the skylight, to see a little better, and I saw that it was called *The Adventures of Telemachus*” (Marguerite Audoux, *Marie-Claire*, trans. John N. Raphael [New York: George H. Doran, 1911], 119). For other examples, see Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, trans. James Swenson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). On the symbolic value of Fénelon’s *Telemachus* as a book in which the ignorant can discover themselves capable of reading, see Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
4. Charles Nodier, “De l’utilité morale de l’instruction pour le peuple,” *Rêveries* (Paris: Plasma, 1979), 173–189.
5. Eugène Lerminier, “De l’encyclopédie à deux sous et de l’instruction du peuple,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1834), vol. 1, 284.

- Strangely, moreover, at the end of the section of Hegel's *Aesthetics* devoted to romantic art, the transition from Shakespearean characters to the sentimentalism of Jean Paul passes by way of quasi-sociological considerations on the "monotony" of these "men belonging to the lower classes who are without education enough to understand national purposes" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], 584). But even before Hegel, A. W. Schlegel had drawn an anonymous but transparent portrait of a novelist writing soliloquies of his capricious humor in his village before coming to the city to be consecrated as a great man: in sum, Jean Paul illustrates the portrait of the autodidact (A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst*, in *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. Ernst Behler and Frank Jolles [Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989], vol. 1, 487).

## CHAPTER 7: WRITING AT WAR

- For a more precise analysis of the singularities of this tale, see Jacques Rancière, "Balzac and the Island of the Book," in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 94–112.
- Honoré de Balzac, *The Country Parson*, in *The Works of Honoré de Balzac*, ed. George Saintsbury (Freeport, NY: Books for Librarians Press, 1971 [reprint of 1901 edition]), vol. 10, 256.
- Prosper Enfantin, Letter to Hoart, Bruneau, Rogé and Massol, September 1833, first published in [Cécile Fournel and Marie Talon,] *Foi nouvelle: Livre des actes, publié par les femmes* (Paris, 1833), cited in the "Notice historique" to *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin* (Paris: Dentu, 1866), vol. 9, 104; Michel Chevalier, *Religion saint-simonienne. Politique industrielle et Système de la Méditerranée* (Paris, 1832), 24.
- "I refuse to go into his room" is Breton's formula mocking the description of the room of Raskolnikov's victim in *Crime and Punishment*. See André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 8.
- Balzac, *Louis Lambert*, in *Works of Honoré de Balzac*, vol. 2, 105.

## CHAPTER 8: THE BOOK IN STYLE

- Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, December 16, 1852, in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), 176.
- Flaubert to Louise Colet, November 22, 1852, *ibid.*, 173.
- Flaubert to Louise Colet, August 9, 1846, *ibid.*, 52.
- Flaubert to Louise Colet, March 27, 1853, in *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973), vol. 2, 285.
- Flaubert to Louise Colet, January 16, 1852, in *Letters 1830–1857*, 154 [translation modified].

6. Flaubert to Louise Colet, June 25, 1853, *ibid.*, 189.
7. Friedrich Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poetry," in *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A. Leslie Willson (New York: Continuum, 1982), 98–99.
8. Gustave Flaubert, *La tentation de Saint Antoine, première version* (Paris: Conard, 1924), 417, 419.
9. Gustave Flaubert, [The Final Meeting Between Charles and Rodolphe], in *Madame Bovary*, ed. Paul de Man (New York: Norton, 1965), 279 [translation modified].
10. Flaubert to Louise Colet, December 9, 1852, in *Letters 1830–1857*, 173 [translation modified].
11. "I saw dancers whose bodies waved with the regularity or the insensible fury of palm trees. Their eyes, full of depth and holding layers of color like in the sea, express nothing but calm, calm and emptiness, like the desert. [...] The feeling of hopelessness that fills them, the conviction of man's nothingness gives their actions, their poses, their looks a grandiose and resigned character. The loose clothing that lends itself to every activity is always related to the individual's functions by its lines and to the sky by its color, etc., and then the sun! the sun! And an immense boredom that devours everything [...]. I recall seeing a bather who had a silver bracelet on his left arm and a vesicant on the other. That is the true, and thus poetic, Orient" (Flaubert to Louise Colet, March 27, 1853, in *Correspondance*, vol. 2, 282–283).
12. "We forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception. If, therefore, the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject has passed out of all relation to the will, what is thus known is no longer the individual thing as such, but the *Idea*, the eternal form, the immediate objectivity of the will at this grade. Thus at the same time, the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*. This, which for the moment is so remarkable (which I well know confirms the saying, attributed to Thomas Paine, that *du sublime au ridicule il n'y a qu'un pas*), will gradually become clearer and less surprising through what follows. It was this that was in Spinoza's mind when he wrote: *mens aeterna est, quatenus res sub aeternitatis specie concipit* (*Ethics*, V, prop. 31, schol.)" (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne [New York: Dover, 1966], vol. 1, pp. 178–179). We can remark in passing the same proximity between the sublime and the ridiculous in the character of Charles at the end of *Madame Bovary*. The liberation from will, pain, and time also characterizes epiphanic experiences in Proust.
13. Gérard Genette, "Flaubert's Silences," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 199.
14. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 11–12.
15. "It is not without a certain pleasure that I contemplated my destroyed espaliers, my flowers all cut up into little pieces, and my vegetables all upside down. Contemplating all this factitious little human arrangements that were overturned in five minutes led

- me to admire the reestablishment of True Order in the place of the false" (Flaubert to Louise Colet, July 12, 1853, in *Correspondance*, vol. 2, 381).
16. "The more beautiful the idea the more harmonious the sentence" (Flaubert to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, December 12, 1857, *ibid.*, vol. 2, 785); "When I come upon a bad assonance or a repetition in one of my sentences, I'm sure I'm floundering in the False" (Flaubert to George Sand, March 10, 1876, in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1857–1880*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1982], 231).
  17. Armand de Pontmartin, for example, denounced the "implacable equality" that puts "good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the great and the small, living creatures and unfeeling objects, soul and matter" on the same level ("Le roman bourgeois et le roman démocrate: MM. Edmond About et Gustave Flaubert," in *Nouvelles causes-du-samedi* [Paris: Michel Lévy, 1859], 326). Significantly, Flaubert will take up the formulation for his own use in the notes intended for the conclusion of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: "All things are equal: good and evil, beautiful and ugly, insignificant and characteristic."
  18. "March, keeping going, don't look back or to the side, break rocks, like a worker" (Flaubert to Louise Colet, March 27, 1853, in *Correspondance*, vol. 2, p. 287).

## CHAPTER 9: THE WRITING OF THE IDEA

1. Stéphane Mallarmé to Gustave Kahn, January 13, 1881, in *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 131.
2. See Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Evolution of Literature" [interview with Jules Huret], in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 23.
3. See the letter from Mallarmé to émile Zola, March 18, 1876, in *Selected Letters*, pp. 113–14.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 210 [translation modified].
5. Mallarmé, "Music and Letters," in *Divagations*, 186.
6. See in particular Albert Mockel, *Esthétique du symbolisme* (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1962); Teodor de Wyzewa, *Nos maîtres* (Paris: Perrin, 1895); and the extracts assembled by Guy Michaud, *Le message symboliste* (Paris, 1947).
7. F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, ed. David Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 228.
8. Jean Thorel, "Les romantiques allemands et les symbolistes français," *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* (September 1891), p. 161. The reference is clearly secondhand: Thorel attributes to the *Philosophy of Nature* a text in fact from the final chapter of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

9. Ibid. Hofstadter translates: “Nature is nothing more to the artist than it is to the philosopher [...].” But this translation destroys the meaning of the chapter as a whole. The translation adopted here follows that of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *L’Absolu littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 342.
10. Mallarmé to Henri Cazalis, April 28, 1866, in *Selected Letters*, p. 60. In a similar way Pierre Quillard’s *La gloire du verbe* (Paris: Librairie de l’art indépendant, 1890) presents the journey of this word from the original plenitude of myth to the lifting of Maya’s veil, the manifestation of the vanity of the word.
11. Mallarmé, “Music and Letters,” *Divagations*, 187.
12. Ibid., p. 186
13. Mockel, *Esthétique du symbolisme*, 86.
14. Ibid.
15. Wyzewa, “Stéphane Mallarmé,” in *Nos maîtres*, 127.
16. Mallarmé, “Music and Letters,” *Divagations*, 185.
17. Mallarmé to Edmund Gosse, January 10, 1893, *Selected Letters*, 190.
18. Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse,” *Divagations*, 210.
19. I am of course referring to Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), without necessarily subscribing to the analysis of literature he advances.
20. This sort of valorization of music as the language of the spirit is particularly strong in Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar* (New York: Ungar, 1975 [1797]).
21. Mallarmé, “Autobiography,” *Divagations*, 3.
22. Mallarmé, “Ballets,” *Divagations*, 134.
23. Ibid., 132.
24. I emphasize that it is a *common* greatness. Indeed, the straits through which Mallarmé’s project of an essential book must pass do not imply, anymore than those of Flaubert’s book about nothing, the impasses produced by a retreat into an “ivory tower.” To the contrary, the “crazy act of writing” is linked to the necessity to “admit that one is indeed where one is supposed to be” (“Villiers de l’Isle-Adam,” *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal [Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2003], vol. 2, 23), that is, not only to respond to the tacit question the early-morning worker poses to the wandering poet in “Confrontation” (“What are YOU doing here?”), but also to consecrate the community’s sojourn or give it the seal of greatness proper to humanity, for which the law, the vote, and the newspaper are insufficient. If the “spiritual fact” of literature can bid farewell to the anecdotes and resemblances of representative theater and identify with “the Fable, virgin of anything place, time, or known characters,” it is because its meaning, borrowed “from the sense which is latent in everyone’s common striving [...], never synthesizes anything but the innate, immortal delicacies and magnificences, unbeknownst to anyone, that are the contribution of a mute audience” (“Richard Wagner: The Reverie of a French Poet,” *Divagations*, 111–112 [translation modified]). Mallarmé’s “literature” obeys the general law that links literature’s absoluteness to its character as an expression of society. In expressing the greatness of the crowd, still unknown to itself, literature anticipates upon a mode of

being of the political community to come. Approaching the new century, it does more or less the same as the “literature” of the author of *The Genius of Christianity* did at the opening of the century that is coming to an end. The difference is that it must also replace the seal of the community that was called “the genius of Christianity.” The “genius” that lifts the community above the squalls and respite of the political order is henceforth that of music or poetry. For Mallarmé, as for Rimbaud, the poet is “a servant, in advance, of rhythms” (“Bucolic,” *Divagations*, 266). The storm of the “crisis in verse” allows for the preparation of the poem of a people to come, the people that will perhaps be born from “the other gestation tak[ing] place,” the “social crisis.” It awaits the great festivals of the future but also protects itself from the vain hunger of the democratic ogre that threatens to swallow up everything in advance and feast upon its own simulacrum. This political, or more precisely archipolitical, task is what radicalizes the Mallarméan question of writing. It gives poetry a vocation as a communal hymn even as it orders its postponement. The contradiction within this vocation meets up with the contradiction in the objectivity of poetry itself, always divided between the monument of the book and the performance of fiction. On this political aspect of the question of poetry, see Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: La politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996).

25. Mallarmé to André Gide, May 14, 1897, *Selected Letters*, 223; Mallarmé to Camille Mauclair, October 8, 1897, *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), vol. 9, 288.

## CHAPTER 10: ARTIFICE, MADNESS, THE WORK

1. Marcel Proust, *Cahier de 1908*, ed. Philip Kolb, *Cahiers Marcel Proust* 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 67.
2. See the famous story told by Valéry about Mallarmé’s question when first showing him *Un coup de dés*: “Don’t you think that this is an act of insanity?” (Paul Valéry, “Mallarmé’s ‘Coup de dés,’” in *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry* [New York: New Directions, 1950], 219); “the idea with its contradictory and sinuous flailing is not at all averse to terminating in a fish tail” (Mallarmé, “Solitude,” *Divagations*, 275).
3. “Declaration of January 27, 1925, in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1989), 240 [translation modified].
4. Andrei Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, trans. Gerald Janecek, rvsd. ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 217.
5. *Ibid.*, 200.
6. Antonin Artaud to Jacques Rivièvre, May 25, 1924, in *Artaud Anthology* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), p. 19.
7. Artaud to Jacques Prével, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), vol. 11, 250.
8. See Tzvetan Todorov’s liquidation of theories that he himself had done so much to introduce in France in *Literature and Its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).
9. Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography*, trans. Irina Masinovsky (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 8–9.

10. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 13.
11. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 11, 1412a 19–22: "Most witty sayings are derived from metaphor, and also from misleading the hearer beforehand. For it becomes more evident to him that he has learnt something, when the conclusion turns out contrary to his expectation, and the mind seems to say, 'How true it is! but I missed it.'"
12. "Even though we sometimes spoke, in a defensive way, about this activity as 'experimental,' our primary goal was always amusement" [André Breton, "L'un dans l'autre," *Poésie et autre* (Paris: Le club du meilleur livre, 1960)].
13. Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, The Formula," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 78. For a more in-depth discussion of this text, see Jacques Rancière, "Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula," in *The Flesh of Words*, 146–164.
14. See "Élie-Joseph Bois and Proust's Defense of *Swann*," in *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Leighton Hodson (London: Routledge, 1989), 84.
15. Proust, *Cahier de 1908*, 61.
16. Proust, excerpt from notebook 12, in *Cahiers Marcel Proust* 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 191.
17. Excerpt from notebook 5, *Cahiers Marcel Proust* 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 259.
18. Proust to André Lang, October 1921, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Phillip Kolb, trans. Johanna Kilmartin (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), vol. 4, 258–259.
19. I am of course referring here to Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), whose successive editions are increasingly oriented in this direction. The second French edition (1970) gives a long development to the theme of noncommunicating parts that makes the *Remembrance* an "anti-logical" machine opposed to any idea of organic coherence, and ends with an added chapter, "Presence and Function of Madness: The Spider," which identifies the book's network with the web of the schizophrenic narrator, stretched between Charlus's madness and Albertine's erotomania.
20. For the first reading, see Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); for the second, the works of Anne Henry, *Marcel Proust: Théories pour une esthétique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1981), and *Proust romancier: Le tombeau égyptien* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983).
21. On the multiplicity of partial objects that make up the metaphor of the cathedral, see Luc Fraisse, *L'œuvre cathédrale: Proust et l'architecture médiévale* (Paris: José Corti, 1990).
22. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in *On Art and Literature 1896–1919*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (New York: Meridian, 1958), 272–273.

## CONCLUSION: A SKEPTICAL ART

1. Proust, *Time Regained*, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), vol. 3, 916 [translation modified].
2. Paul Valéry, "Rhums," in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), vol. 14, 210.

3. Ibid., 209.
4. Valéry, "Odds and Ends," *Collected Works*, vol. 14, 99.
5. See Valéry to André Gide, December 3, 1902, in *Self-Portraits: The Gide-Valéry Letters, 1890–1942*, ed. Robert Mallet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 242.
6. Valéry, *Cahiers/Notebooks*, ed. Brian Stimpson (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), vol. 2, 518.
7. Valéry, "I Would Sometimes Say to Stéphane Mallarmé," in *Collected Works*, vol. 8, 293.

"*Mute Speech* counts among Jacques Rancière's most intensive and compelling studies of the origins and consequences of modern literature. Taking German Romantic philosophy as a point of departure and setting his sights on Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust, Rancière draws his readers through the many contradictions that give rise to the aesthetic turn of our age. Elegantly translated by James Swenson, *Mute Speech* invites us to think afresh the philosophical, aesthetic, and political dilemmas that ground the modern canon."

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Jacques Rancière has continually unsettled political discourse, particularly through his questioning of aesthetic "distributions of the sensible," which configure the limits of what can be seen and said. Widely recognized as a seminal work in Rancière's corpus, the translation of which is long overdue, *Mute Speech* is an intellectual tour de force proposing a new framework for thinking about the history of art and literature. Rancière argues that our current notion of "literature" is a relatively recent creation, having first appeared in the wake of the French Revolution and with the rise of Romanticism. In its rejection of the system of representational hierarchies that had constituted *belles-lettres*, "literature" is founded upon a radical equivalence in which all things are possible expressions of the life of a people. With an analysis reaching back to Plato, Aristotle, the German Romantics, Vico, and Cervantes and concluding with brilliant readings of Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust, Rancière demonstrates the uncontrollable democratic impulse lying at the heart of literature's still-vital capacity for reinvention.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE is professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Paris VIII. Among his major works translated into English are *The Future of the Image*, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, and *The Politics of Aesthetics* (edited with Gabriel Rockhill).

GABRIEL ROCKHILL is assistant professor of philosophy at Villanova University and program director at the Collège International de Philosophie. He is the author of *Logique de l'histoire* and coeditor of the *Politics of Culture and the Spirit of Critique: Dialogues*, as well as coauthor of *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*.

JAMES SWENSON is associate professor of French and dean of humanities at Rutgers University. He is the author of *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution* and a well-known translator of Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière.

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN CRITICAL THEORY



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