

THE WORK OF DIFFERENCE: FORM AND FORMATION IN TWENTIETH-
CENTURY LITERATURE AND THEORY

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My dissertation argues for a non-romantic conception of the literary work, one that can account for a certain integrity of the work without reducing it to a form of identity based on closure, completion, or self-reflection.

It begins by taking issue with a persistently romantic problematic in contemporary criticism and theory. Deriving from the work of Immanuel Kant, this problematic leads critics to pose the question of a work's organization in terms of two alternatives: on the one hand, a totalizing form or system, and on the other a disruptive break or freedom. Neither alternative is deemed adequate to a notion of literature; rather, literature becomes the privileged locus and paradoxical presentation of the tension between them.

I proceed with an analysis of the fragment in early German romanticism as instantiating a new model of the literary work, one in which the conflict between freedom and system is preserved in an opposition between literary form and the activity of reflection. I discuss the self-perpetuating mechanism of this conflict as it pervades major critical statements of the twentieth-century, focusing on the works of Cleanth Brooks, Maurice Blanchot, and Gilles Deleuze.

The second half of the dissertation analyzes a series of twentieth-century literary texts in order to argue that something else is being thought by these texts than what can be apprehended either by the terms of a renewed romanticism, or by literary

histories that understand modernism as a reaction to romanticism. Each of these texts presents a distinct challenge to a different aspect of the romantic paradigm. Beckett's trilogy complicates the self-reflection at the heart of the romantic model of art; and in the disjunction it introduces between its figures and its actual functioning, it produces an image of the necessity of writing as a wholly external and unassailable demand. Proust's novel likewise traces a disjunction between the self, its sense impressions, and their conversion into a work of art, representing its own hyperbolic organization in the form of its protagonist's vocation to write. Stein's work, finally, replaces romantic forms of organic development with an open, generative repetition.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Audrey Wasser was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1977 and grew up in Little Silver, New Jersey. She earned her B.A. at Oberlin College and an M.A. at the University of Florida before beginning her studies at Cornell University. She spent the academic year 2006-2007 in Paris and Lille working on this dissertation.

To Rob, who read every word

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CHAPTER ONE

FORM AND FRAGMENTATION: THE SEED AND THE MIRROR

I. The Question of Literature

Jacques Derrida opens the text of “La double séance” with a series of framed quotations from Mallarmé’s *Le livre*. Yet another quotation rapidly follows: the question “*what is literature?*” which Derrida writes without question mark. “La double séance,” he says, referring either to a passage in Mallarmé’s text or to the two meetings of his own study group,

... dont je n’aurai jamais le front ou l’aplomb de dire qu’elle est réservée à la question *qu’est-ce que la littérature*, cette question devant désormais être reçue comme une citation déjà où se laisserait solliciter la place du *qu’est-ce que*, tout autant que l’autorité présumée par laquelle on soumet quoi que ce soit, singulièrement la littérature, à la forme de son inquisition. (219/117)¹

This question is raised in the context of Mallarmé’s text which, Derrida suggests, may be asking it without quoting it. Derrida, on the other hand, manages to quote it without asking it: and in quoting or presenting it this way, in divorcing it from its immediately cognitive or communicative function, he returns the question to a sort of literary status.

Presenting it without deigning to ask it, Derrida draws attention to the construction of the question itself, to what is already given in its articulation, to the implications and presuppositions that shape it and allow it to be asked. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze repeatedly points out in his own work that it is in the articulation of a

¹ Throughout, the first set of page numbers refers to the French, the second to the English translation.

question or problem, rather than in its response, that we can locate “[la] genèse de l’acte de penser dans la pensée même” (*Différence et répétition* 182/158). In this way “une solution a toujours la vérité qu’elle mérite,” Deleuze proposes, according to the measure of the problem one sets up (206/159).² In the spirit of these gestures, I would like to begin with the question of this question “What is literature?” in order to examine the problems that underlie its formulation, the particular history and plane of suppositions it is made to draw upon, and the kinds of answers it makes intelligible or unintelligible.

What is the sense of a question such as “What is literature?”? Certain conditions of sense are external, notably the context of the question: Does it come from the side of literary production? Of literary consumption? Or from an institution of literary studies, the site of my own investigation? Moreover, a certain will, power and authority are bound up with the question’s posing, with the question of “who wants to know?” as Deleuze puts it, following a Nietzschean line.³

But we can also locate a genesis of sense internal to the question itself. Just as Heidegger cautions that the question “What is being?” already involves us in a certain prior understanding of this “is” (Heidegger 4), so the question “What is literature?” rests on the assumption that literature is the kind of thing to which being can be attributed; it involves a prior understanding of what it means to define the essence of something, and of what we mean when we say that something “is.” In behaving as if an answer to the question were possible, we suggest that literature is an entity coherent enough to be demarcated and predicated in a definite way outside of its instantiation in individual works (“Literature is X”), or as Derek Attridge writes in his introduction to

² See also *Le Bergsonism* 4 and *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* 16, 81.

³ See *Nietzsche et la philosophie* 86-88.

Acts of Literature, “This question ... asks for a statement of the essence of literature, for that which distinguishes literature from all that is not literature” (Attridge 1).

“What is...?” in other words, is the paradigmatic formula of the metaphysical question of essence (Deleuze *Nietzsche* 86/75). It “announc[es] that which is just as it is,” Derrida writes (“Che cos’è la poesia?” 237): not only does the form of the question attribute a predicable being, essence, or presence to literature, but it attempts to grasp this being as stable and self-identical. Yet what may be obscured from the moment the question is posed this way is the possibility of literature or of the literary work’s having a different relationship to being than the one announced by this interrogation. Perhaps, more specifically, the literary work questions our habits of thinking being, and perhaps literature is itself something that can pose a question to being.

The thrust of the question “what is literature?” is philosophical, while at the same time it seeks to identify that which distinguishes literature from other forms of discourse, among them philosophy. Such a question can only be quoted, as Derrida suggests, because it is already invested in, or invested by, a certain pre-confrontation between literature and philosophy, operating within an already-given understanding and distinction between these two discursive fields and their supposedly different uses of language, and deciding in advance the terms of their encounter. But the separation of these discourses into distinct domains of human activity is the product of a particular and fairly recent history, which I would like to review briefly here.

“Literature” derives from the Latin *litteratura*, with the root *littera*, letter, likely a translation of the Greek *grammatike*, with the root *gramme*. Its current usage—where “literature” refers to a particular body of writing, as opposed to written culture in general—can be traced back no earlier than the 1730’s in France and

Germany,⁴ slightly later in England,⁵ although this modern sense of the term was not consistent until the second half of that century (Escarpit 49). Most scholars cite the publication of Lessing's review *Briefe dei neueste Literatur betreffend* (1759), and Mme de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*,⁶ (1800), where the sense of "literature" as an "art of writing" as opposed to the other arts seems to have been solidified (ibid. 79). At the same time as the publication of Mme de Staël's work, August Schlegel announced his *Lectures on Art and Fine Literature*, (delivered in Berlin in 1802), likewise treating "literature" as a specific kind of fine art, as well as marking the entrance of this literary art into the University as a legitimate object of study (Lacoue Labarthe and Nancy 264/82).⁷

In what is perhaps the best-known lexicographical approach to the concept of literature, the French journalist and "sociologist of literature" Robert Escarpit notes that, prior to the 18th century, the term "literature" designated a general erudition or knowledge of written culture (as today when we refer to a "man of letters"), and carried with it implications of belonging to an intellectual elite. By the end of the century, the term ceased to designate a general quality of erudition, or, by association, a group of erudite men, and came to refer instead to the result of an activity, and to a particular object of study. "La hiérarchie restrictive subsiste," Escarpit writes, "mais au lieu de s'appliquer aux hommes, elle s'applique aux oeuvres, à l'acte d'écrire, à la publication ... On n'a plus de la littérature, on en fait" (50). Yet even in this sense of

⁴ René Wellek cites François Granet's series *Réflexions sur les ouvrages de littérature* (1736-40).

⁵ Wellek cites Adam Ferguson's chapter "Of the History of Literature" in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767); also Robert Chambers' *A History of English Language and Literature* (1836).

⁶ Wellek also notes that Voltaire speaks of "les genres de littérature" in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), mentions L'Abbé Sabatier de Castres' *Les Siècles de littérature française* (1772), and Tiraboschi's *Storia della letteratura italiana* (also 1772). See both René Wellek and Robert Escarpit.

⁷ Hereafter cited as *AL*.

literature as something made or produced, the term continued to encompass both intellectual and aesthetic production; hierarchical judgments were accordingly founded sometimes on the value of intellect, sometimes on the value of art. The notion of literature has continued to bear these two non-coincidental aspects ever since: on the one hand an aesthetic aspect, and on the other an epistemological one, referring sometimes to the art of writing, and sometimes to a body of intellectual, written material (ibid.).

This period saw a marked rise in currency of the term “literature” over the already existent term “poetry,” which, until the eighteenth century, was an available label used generally to indicate the aesthetic aspect of any written work. As the novel rose to prominence and struggled for legitimacy, the designation “literature” became useful for yoking together various genres under an umbrella concept, and at the same time lent those genres, and especially the novel, the aesthetic cachet previously reserved for what was designated by the term “poetry.” This turn of events suggests that, insofar as the concept of literature can be considered a modern phenomenon, any serious attention to the question of literature must give prominent place to a consideration of the genre of the novel. For the early German romantics, the novel represented an attempt to overcome the prevailing neo-classical divisions of genre; and in their theorization and designation of a new concept by the name of “literature”—what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call the genre of Literature as such—the romantics aimed a special kind of universality of the written work, one open to literature’s inherent generativity, yet delimited and autonomous with respect to processes of history, society, and a philosophy of the absolute (*AL* 21/11).

In the persistence of both terms, “literature” and “poetry,” a marked distinction also persisted between them, so that “poetry,” true to its etymology, could be used to designate creation *par excellence*, while “literature,” retaining its own “semantic

memory,” as Escarpit aptly calls it (51), also kept its aristocratic connotation to indicate knowledgeable usage of written language—that is, a technique. Finally, Escarpit argues that the older and more general concept of literature as written intellectual material, so rich at the outset, became increasingly impoverished—like a daisy shedding its petals, he suggests—as the discourses of the natural sciences, human sciences, and philosophy slowly abandoned it and became more specialized in their own right (50).⁸ In this narrative, literature’s distinction from philosophy appears as the result of a subtractive operation. A study of the changing usage of the term literature, in short, reveals certain tensions in the notion as we have received it, namely: between literature as aesthetic and as intellectual output, as creation and technique, as process and product.

Along these lines, I would point out the question “What is literature?” not only obscures a certain confrontation between literature and philosophy that is embedded in the question’s formulation, but also covers over the historical process that underlies the possibility of its being asked. The timeless form of the “What is...?” implies that a meta-discourse of questioning (such as philosophy) can be distinguished in its essence from the literary discourse set up as its object. But can philosophy be neatly distinguished from literature in this way? Moreover, is an encounter with literature wholly detached from an encounter with this (philosophical) question of its own being even possible? The lexicographical study, I might add, is itself a discourse of erudition and truth, and a product of the same discursive division of labor it attempts to describe; this is another way, perhaps, in which literature is made to “answer” to a

⁸ See also T.C. Pollock’s *The Nature of Literature* (1942): “It is interesting to note that the term literature even in its broad modern sense did not appear until the term science had been specialized to its modern meaning; and that literature did not receive its restricted modern meaning until the assumptions of inductive science were widely understood” (qtd. in Escarpit, 50).

discourse of truth. I propose that we turn to a different locus of the questioning of the concept of literature: namely, to the locus of the literary-critical itself.

Derrida does not have the “militant innocence,” in his words, either to pose the question “What is literature?” directly, or to pronounce it in the place of Mallarmé’s text—that is, to unveil this formula as the essential truth of Mallarmé’s work—because his own most consistent “place of interest” has been in the confrontation, corner, or fold between literature and truth, or literature and philosophy: two domains so mutually implicated that, as Derrida suggests elsewhere, a “literal” approach to the question would make it a “bad question or an impossible question” (*Demeure* 22-3). Likewise, Maurice Blanchot, perhaps the most important source of Derrida’s own conception of literature, writes in “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” (1949): “On a constaté avec surprise que la question ‘Qu’est-ce que la littérature?’ n’avait jamais reçu que des réponses insignifiantes” (294/22). Blanchot is in part signaling his dissatisfaction with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* which appeared two years earlier;⁹ no doubt he is also responding to Jean Paulhan’s *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* (1941).¹⁰ Blanchot’s argument goes on to treat what he calls the “nullity” or “emptiness” of literature, literature’s relationship to its own negation, as I will discuss in more detail later on. But his dismissal of the explicit formulation of this question already suggests several things: first, that the question’s possible responses have been inadequate either to an experience of literature or to implicit answers we already possess; and second, that not only is the question itself consigned to the past, as

⁹ Published as a series of essays in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1947. Blanchot’s essay is formulated in response to Sartre’s work, challenging Sartre’s conception of literature as being continuous with action in the world.

¹⁰ Early in his book, Paulhan cites the question of literature as “cette question enfantine ... que toute une vie se passe à esquiver” (26). Blanchot wrote three short pieces in response to Paulhan’s book, gathering them together in a 1942 pamphlet entitled “Comment la littérature est-elle possible?” and again in *Faux Pas* in abbreviated form (Hill 240).

implied by Blanchot's use of the past perfect, but so is any potential surprise at the question's failure to provoke a significant response. We might ask, then, to what past does this surprise belong? Ultimately, Blanchot's rejection of the explicitly reflective, cognitive, and philosophical form of the question draws attention to literature's unique ability to "manifest itself from itself ... to re-emerge as the question itself, and of itself" (Gasché, "Felicities" 35).

"Admettons que la littérature commence," writes Blanchot, "au moment où la littérature devient une question" (ibid. 293/21). When Blanchot suggests that the "beginning" of literature—and this trope of literature's beginning will merit investigation later on—with the moment of its critical questioning, his claim is no less historical than metaphysical. The emergence of the concept of literature and of the literary work as we know them today, Blanchot makes clear in several places in his work, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy subsequently argue, coincides, in fact, with the historical moment of the most radical questioning of these concepts. That is, the notion of literature was, and in its most developed form continues to be, inseparable from a deep-seated questioning of that notion. In this sense, it is more accurate to refer to the formation of a literary-critical problematic than to the emergence of a single and self-identical concept of "literature."

The problematic I have in mind is one initially elaborated by the theoretical writings of early German romanticism—"romanticism" in general being the name of both an historical moment and a constellation of concepts and sensibilities nearly universally credited with being perpetuated, to a greater or lesser extent, in assumptions about the nature of literature and criticism today.¹¹ M. H. Abrams' landmark work *The Mirror and the Lamp* opens with the claim, for example, that "the

¹¹ For an alternative narrative, however, see Adrian Marino's *The Biography of "The Idea of Literature" from Antiquity to the Baroque* (1996).

development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind” (Abrams vii). Paul de Man has declared that “the main points around which contemporary methodological and ideological arguments circle can almost always be traced directly back to the romantic heritage,” a heritage all the more difficult to demarcate clearly, he argues, because it originates in “a period of time that we have ourselves experienced” (*Rhetoric* 48-49). And in similarly revelatory pronouncements, Blanchot declares that romanticism “inaugurates an epoch” (*L’Entretien* 522/356), while Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, for whom Blanchot is an explicit reference, call the *Athenaeum* journal of Jena romanticism “our birthplace” (*AL* 17/8), arguing that what happened in Jena over a period of about two years “opens the critical age to which we still belong” (original book jacket/xxii). These authors would claim that a romantic conception of literature is “mirrored” in or at the “root” of nearly all of our literary-critical notions today, if they were not already well aware that such metaphors have been well prepared by a romantic rhetoric that continues to supply dominant models for thought as well as for the classification and continuity of literary history.

What emerges at this particular moment of Jena romanticism, a moment whose features I will discuss in more detail shortly, is nothing less than the critical question of literature itself, and of literature’s own identification with this question: with literature’s investment in critical self-reflection, and with a being put-into-question as what is most “proper” to literature. In other words, in romanticism, literature appears as the privileged form of its own critical question. Theory, moreover, becomes “literary.” In the face of this thinking that romanticism makes possible, and in the attempt to break with what they alternately call a “romantic unconscious,” a romantic “naïveté,” and a romantic “repetitive compulsion” at work today “in most of the

central motifs of our ‘modernity,’” Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy advocate a “vigilance,” or proof of a “minimum of lucidity” (26-28/15-17).

My argument will thus take up this (persistent) claim of romanticism’s persistence, especially as it is articulated by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s outstanding study *L’absolu littéraire*. I will argue that romantic conceptions—not only of literature but of the task of criticism—pervade twentieth-century formulations, from the American New Critics’ insistence on the internal coherence and organic unity of the literary work, to Maurice Blanchot’s examination of the inspiration and sacrifice of the work, to Jacques Derrida’s treatment of the literary “event.” Ultimately, it is my contention that something else is being thought by certain literary experiments of the twentieth-century than what has been or can be apprehended either by the terms of a renewed romanticism, or by notions of literary history that understand modernism as a reaction to romanticism—or, even further, by a self-conscious lucidity in the face of a romantic repetition-compulsion. For romanticism and the critique or overcoming of romanticism—as well as the critique *of* overcoming romanticism, I hope to make clear, are part and parcel of the same problematic.

In place of this problematic, which has its origins in Kantian philosophy and Kant’s subsequent reception in German idealism, I would like to examine the resources of an alternative philosophical trajectory, one that bears a different set of assumptions and different conceptual tools. This trajectory has its beginnings in a moment prior to the history of Kantian aesthetics, namely in the work of Benedict de Spinoza and Spinoza’s treatment of necessity; and it continues through the twentieth century to Gilles Deleuze’s reconsideration of determination, and to his rejection of schemas of reflection and recognition in favor of other forms of thought. My interest lies in stepping outside of the realm of aesthetics proper in order to examine notions of being and determination that inform aesthetic concepts. In this way, I hope to ask

whether the constitutive tension at the heart of our received notion of literature, and of the autonomy and integrity of the literary work, can not be, or has not already been, thought otherwise.

II. Reading Romanticism

“Romanticism” may be the most fraught term in the history of literary scholarship. In 1924 Arthur Lovejoy famously described it as a “confusion of terminology and of thought which has for a century been the scandal of literary history and criticism, and is still... copiously productive of historical errors and of dangerously indiscriminating diagnoses of the moral and aesthetic maladies of our age” (“Discrimination” 234). While Lovejoy argued for the fundamental heterogeneity of the various “thought-complexes” that had been labeled “romantic,” advocating for the use of “romanticisms” in the plural, René Wellek, on the other hand, responded in “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History” (1949) with an argument for the ultimate “unity of theories, philosophies, and style” of European romanticism (Wellek, *Concepts* 129). When, for the sake of a history of ideas, Lovejoy was pressed to attribute some content to the term “romanticism,” he articulated its characteristic features as a “revolt against the finite” (Lovejoy, “Meaning” 264), and an interest in concepts of “organicism, dynamism, and diversitarianism” (ibid. 272). Wellek, on the other hand, named three different features of romanticism: “a view of poetry as knowledge of the deepest reality, of nature as a living whole, and of [poetic style] as primarily myth and symbolism” (Wellek, *Concepts* 161). It hardly seems surprising that Lovejoy, who argued for the plurality of “romanticisms,” ultimately defined romanticism according to concepts and values of diversity and becoming, while Wellek, who has been accused of an excessive “passion for unity” (Crane, qtd. in *Concepts* 199) focused instead on romanticism’s unifying and totalizing figures (the

poem as form of knowledge, totality as the form of nature, symbolism as the unity of style). In short, it seems the tendency of these scholars was either to determine the content of romanticism according to the measure of their methods, or conversely, to allow their methods to be shaped by what they saw as their object of study.¹² Yet what accounts for the radical divergence in their readings of what is ostensibly the same object? Moreover, what accounts for the fixation on definition, and specifically on the definition of such an unruly object? The stakes are not negligible, for Wellek claims that to give up on a definition of the term “romanticism” is to abandon “the central task of literary history” (ibid. 197).

In his posthumous “philosophical fragments,” Friedrich Schlegel presents a sketch for a new metaphysics in a way that may help to elucidate this question. He writes:

This metaphysics should proceed through several cycles, ever greater and longer. Once the end has been reached, it should start again from the beginning, alternating between chaos and system, preparing chaos for the system, then a new chaos (This procedure very philosophical).
(qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 121)

It is this “alternation between chaos and system” that I would like to stress as a feature of romanticism itself, and one that seems to extend equally to romanticism’s inheritance. If Wellek and Lovejoy can be said to represent two extreme tendencies in romanticism’s reception—let us call them a tendency towards unification on the one hand and towards dispersal on the other—we must ask, first of all, whether both of

¹² Morse Peckham is also noteworthy in this context, for in *The Triumph of Romanticism* not only does he attempt to “reconcile Wellek and Lovejoy” (as well as “Lovejoy with himself”) (Peckham 8), but the content he claims for romanticism involves opposing tensions (a “positive romanticism” and a “negative romanticism”) which are ultimately resolved in a global conception of romanticism as a break with Enlightenment reason.

these tendencies are not already found and made to relate in—indeed, are prescribed by—romanticism as such. In the passage from Schlegel above, the alternation is positioned as the outcome or continuation of a cycle or series of cycles, which should lead us to wonder whether what was produced under the retrospective label of “romanticism” was not also romanticism’s mechanism of self-perpetuation.¹³

In romanticism’s investment in reflection as both the privileged form of thought and of the literary work itself, we see a continual dialectic between the positing of a form and the overcoming of that form. Among other things, this led to a self-conscious passion for definition. “Romantic criticism [today]... cannot help but being obsessed with redefining what it admits cannot be defined,” Justin Clemens comments in a recent work (Clemens 14). Yet it must be noted that this tension between definition and the undefinable was already an explicit concern of the early German romantics. “There are classifications that are bad enough as classifications,” Schlegel observes in a fragment, “but which nonetheless have dominated whole nations and eras” (Schlegel, *Athenaeum* 55; qtd. in *AL* 8/1).¹⁴ The concern with classification appears in the Schlegels’ opposition of the terms “romantic” and “classical,” as well as their exploration of the versatility and mixability of literary genres.¹⁵ Above all, a practice of definition was at work in the romantic fragment

¹³ See Wellek’s “The Concept of Romanticism” for a semantic history of the terms “romantic” and “romanticism.” Roughly, the former was used in the early nineteenth century to describe new poetry in a way that would oppose it to both classical and neoclassical works, while the latter was the retrospective classification of a literary movement that, at least in Germany as well as England, did not describe itself as “romantic.”

¹⁴ Consider also Friedrich’s Schlegel’s comment in a letter to his brother August: “I can hardly send you my explication of the word Romantic because it would take—125 pages” (qtd. in *AL* 15/7). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy comment: “Une telle définition ironique—ou l’ironie d’une telle absence de définition—mériterait au fond d’être érigée en symbole. Tout le « projet » romantique est là : tout le « projet » romantique, c’est-à-dire ce bref, intense et fulgurant moment d’écriture qui ouvre à lui seul toute une époque, mais s’épuise à ne pouvoir saisir son essence et sa visée” (ibid).

¹⁵ The opposition appears most notably in August Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809-11), while Jean Paul Friedrich Richter’s *School for Aesthetics* (1804) was another important

(“fragments are definitions of the fragment,” Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy remind us (*AL* 64/44)). In the plurality of the fragment, definition itself was refashioned as self-reflexive, paradoxical, multiple, and intentionally incomplete.

III. The Fragment

The romantic fragment inaugurates a new model of the literary work (*AL* 57/39), and it does so on the basis of an encounter with Kantian philosophy. More precisely, the romantics inherit a “crisis” of the Kantian system (“si tant est du moins qu’ on puisse « succéder » à une crise,” write Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy [*AL* 46/32]), as it was addressed in idealist philosophies of the time, namely in Fichte and Schelling’s work, and in Hegel’s emerging system. This crisis was received as a rift in Kant’s system between the necessity of the material world and the freedom of the moral subject, and it came to a head in Kant’s conception of the subject itself. On the one hand the subject was understood according to the faculty of understanding and its sensible presentation of concepts, and on the other according to reason, and the unrepresentable Idea of freedom. In the most fundamental terms, this was a conflict between the subject’s form and his freedom, his presentation and the unrepresentable. In other terms, it was a question of how to guarantee the presence of the moral subject to himself.

The third *Critique* has been described as “a tempest in the depths of the chasm opened up in the subject” (Deleuze, *Kant* xii). The stated role of the third *Critique* in Kant’s system is well known: it is to “combin[e] the two parts of philosophy into one whole” (Kant, Introduction §III), to bridge the “incalculable gulf” (§II) between the philosophy of nature and the moral philosophy, the theoretical and the practical. Kant turns to the power of judgment, or the faculty for thinking the particular under the

source, and Mme de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (1814) was largely responsible for its dissemination.

universal, as the intermediary between reason and the understanding. Judgment has as its *a priori* principle that what is “contingent for human insight” in a particular (empirical) experience of nature nevertheless “contains a lawful unity,” that is, is subsumable under universal or necessary laws (§V). This principle, which Kant names the “purposiveness” of nature, asserts the unity and lawfulness of nature, not in itself, but for the purposes of our cognition. We thus behave *as if* the organization of nature were the unified “expression of a creative will” (Cassirer 296)—that is, as if nature were a work of art. Purposiveness, in other words, works on the basis of an analogy with art, because, as Kant explains, “we can be conscious of the [purposiveness of objects] only in the case of products of art” (Kant, First Introduction §IX).

Like nature, the work of art is produced freely, without concept or end, while its unity is located in the form of its representation, its “purposiveness without purpose” for the subject that beholds it (§15). The beautiful is thus grounded not in the object itself, but in “the representational state of the subject,” “in the feeling... of unison in the play of the powers of the mind” in reflective judgment (*ibid.*). Meanwhile the subject likewise seeks his unity in the form of the beautiful: the subject “s’offre dans l’image (*Bild*) de ce qui est à la fois sans concept et sans fin” (*AL* 45/31). In reflection, the beautiful unifies and totalizes, and in this way serves as the analagon of Ideas, which otherwise know no sensible presentation.¹⁶ “Le ‘systeme’ critique de Kant,” write Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “avait en effet impliqué l’art au point où le pouvoir critique de la raison devait s’appliquer à l’activité critique (ou formatrice : c’est la même) prise pour elle-même” (376/105). The aesthetic, in other words, became the

¹⁶ There are only three ideas of reason: these are the postulates of God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul. Ideas refer to the “absolute totality of all possible experience,” which is itself not an object of experience (*Prolegomena* §40).

terrain on which reason could reflect on itself, and in so doing pose the question of its own form.

The aesthetic, in short, became the necessary and privileged terrain of the analysis of reflective judgment, and in turn the linchpin of the unity of Kant's system. Kant bequeathed the question of art to philosophy *as* philosophy's most proper question (43/30); philosophy will henceforth have to pass through the question of art on its way to the absolute.

The romantics pick up a concern with the absolute that was characteristic of German Idealism at the time. Specifically, they pick up the imperative of thinking the absolute as an overcoming of what was received as the Kantian divide between the necessity of nature and the freedom of the subject. Hegel, for example, in *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801), characterizes this divide as a dualism of subject and object, which failed to attain the truly speculative or synthetic thinking that could lead to the thought of the absolute. Effective speculation, on the other hand, would involve the presentation of the Idea, or of the freedom of the subject, to itself, "the auto-recognition of the Idea as the subject's own form" (AL 47/33). Yet what distinguishes romanticism from idealism more broadly is not merely the mixed terrain of its investigation—literary and art criticism as well as more "properly" literary and philosophical discourse—but an investment in the unifying function of the idea of the beautiful, and in a concomitant aestheticization of that idea. As Gasché explains: "Within the landscape of idealism in general, the very possibility that the unifying idea of the beautiful can seek presentation as beautiful idea, and that unification hence is always necessarily aesthetic, sensible, and manifold... this is what constitutes the Romantic vision and demarcates it from the Idealism of Fichte and Hegel" (Gasché, "Ideality" xiv).

Yet the aims of idealism help us understand those of early romanticism.

Lacoue Labarthe and Nancy open *L'absolu littéraire* with a discussion of the anonymous, unfinished text called the “Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism”¹⁷ in order to introduce the argument that romanticism proceeds from the fracture between nature and freedom in Kant’s system. Most importantly, they assert the necessity of a philosophical analysis of romanticism’s productions: “le romantisme en effet, s’il n’est pas lui-même entièrement ni simplement philosophique, n’est en toute rigueur compréhensible (voire accessible) qu’à partir du philosophique, dans son articulation propre et du reste unique (c’est à dire inédite au philosophique” (42/29). Philosophy “controls” romanticism (ibid.), insofar as it donates romanticism’s central concern, and renders its originality intelligible.

The terms of the “System-Programme” text take up a generally idealist “will to system,” in which “le système est visé au nom et dans la forme d’une exigence, d’un désir ou d’une volonté”; the system is thus an ethical project, but the ultimate project or final work of humanity (“à faire”) (48/33-34), the completion of the world as the task, and the corollary, of the absolute subject. This is the “living system” of the world organized in terms of absolute freedom, yet unified in the form of the beautiful. The aesthetic characterizes the romantic notion of system (the system is beautiful) and at the same time serves to sublimate the very opposition between system and freedom (49/35)—as the System-Programme text states, “*truth and goodness* are only siblings in *beauty*” (*Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* 186).

The romantic practice of the fragment picks up this “will to system” and puts it to work in the production of a new mode of writing. The fragment is “the romantic genre *par excellence*” (*AL* 58/40); and the *Athenaeum Fragments*, in their collective

¹⁷ While the manuscript is in Hegel’s handwriting, it is likely a copy of a text composed by Schelling or Hölderlin, and indicative of the collaboration of all three. The text has been dated to the summer 1796 (see *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, 185).

and anonymous authorship,¹⁸ represent the high point of the genre. The *Athenaeum* journal, for its brief duration of two years (1798-1800) and six issues, featured other collections of fragments by Friedrich Schlegel (*Ideas*) and Novalis (*Grains of Pollen*), though it was Schlegel who was the most obsessed with the form, filling roughly 180 notebooks over the course of his life with his aphoristic jottings (Eichner 5). It must be noted, however, that from a purely formal perspective, the romantic fragment was hardly novel. Schlegel was inspired to write “fragments,” as he called them, after the publication of Chamfort’s *Pensées, maximes et anecdotes* in 1796,¹⁹ and was familiar with the English and French moralists before him, and likely Montaigne’s *Essays* and Pascal’s *Pensées* as well.²⁰ For this reason, Gasché argues that the romantic fragment attains its distinct originality only in its deliberately philosophical aims, even if the *concept* of the fragment remained “clearly discrepant from the literary devices on which the written fragments rely” (x). Yet we must not overlook the fact that this very discrepancy between theory and practice was both addressed by and intentionally re-staged in the practice of the fragment. The fragment indeed emerged in response to a philosophical problem, but it is precisely as the enactment of an aesthetic idea—that is, as the non-conceptual presentation of a conflict between philosophy and art in the domain of art—that the genre attains its true significance. This significance is nothing short than the initiation of a new model of the literary work. And the notion of the model, or exemplar, itself belongs to the logic of the fragment.

¹⁸ The majority have been attributed to Friedrich Schlegel, others to August, some to Schleiermacher, some to Novalis, and a few a combination of the above. In general they were written and published in the spirit of a collective enterprise. The concept of the fragment is itself intimately bound up with that of sociality and political collectivity, as we can see in F. Schlegel’s Critical Fragment 103 for example, where the unity of a “motley heap of ideas ... aiming at a single purpose” is compared to “that free and equal fellowship in which ... the citizens of the perfect state will live at some future date.”

¹⁹ Translated into German in 1797, and reviewed favorably by August Schlegel (Firchow 14).

²⁰ In Critical Fragment 59, for example, Schlegel compares Chamfort and Shaftesbury’s conceptions of wit. See also *AL* 58/40.

The fragments of the Jena romantics are difficult to describe, and even more difficult to quote from. As an ensemble (and as an ensemble of ensembles, such as the *Athenaeum* journal) they share certain characteristics, namely: a deliberately fragmentary form, a mixture of objects treated, an obsession with self-reflection, an investment in irony, a straining towards universality, and a valorization of a progressive image of truth. Yet not all fragments exhibit all of these features, nor is any one feature adequate to all of them; rather, this description can only serve as a general characterization of plural and overlapping elements. Moreover, the quality of the fragments is uneven, with their declarations wavering between bold insight and juvenile pretension, and their fragmentary form emerging as much from an engagement with philosophical idealism as from Schlegel's notorious inability to concentrate. Finally, their thematic plurality and use of irony make them troublesome objects to bundle off as quotations in support of another discourse, either in whole or in part. Nevertheless, I will continue to quote from them, while advising the reader to consult the text of the fragments in other available sources.²¹

The romantic fragment is a deliberate and determinate form, which means that its fragmentation is essential, not accidental or extrinsic (*AL* 62/42). It is bound up with a re-thinking of system, and, as Peter Szondi emphasizes, with a philosophy of history in which the rift of modernity is overcome only in some past or future age (Szondi 68). Rather than a mere piece or part of a totality, the fragment participates in a "project" of totalization both by gesturing beyond itself to a whole in which it would take part, and by substituting itself *for* that whole. In this way, the fragment is akin to the historical ruin, which is both a remainder of the past and a monumentalized image of that past, simultaneously recalling and excluding the past through a process of

²¹ See, for example, Schlegel's *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1991.

evocation and substitution. In what follows, I will describe this two-fold function of the fragment as controlled by the two poles of production and reflection, or the two metaphors of the *seed* and the *mirror*.

In *Athenaeum Fragment 22 F*, Schlegel describes his notion of “projects” as “fragments of the future” (Schlegel, *AF 22*).²² “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,” he writes (*ibid.*). In other words, “fragments of the future” bear this double task of idealizing or providing an image of—of projecting—the system in which they participate, and simultaneously of realizing that system within themselves. They are seeds or embryos of systems: “A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object” (*ibid.*). On the one hand it is their incompleteness that makes possible a synthetic overcoming of that very incompleteness; their form or limit that make possible an overcoming of that limit: “every thinking part of an organization should not feel its limits without at the same time feeling its unity in relation to the whole” (*I 48*). On the other, the fragments end up lending an image of incompleteness to this very whole, as Schlegel notes in the *Literary Notebooks*: “Auch das größte System ist doch nur Fragment” [Even the greatest system is only a fragment] (*LN 921*). “By combining system and fragment in this fashion,” Gasché suggests, “the Romantics were able to avoid the dogmatic and sclerotic connotations that come with the notion of the system, and to ward off the specter of abstraction associated with system building, while supporting at the same time the traditional

²² The *Athenaeum* Fragments will be abbreviated as AF; the number refers to the fragment, not the page number. I give Schlegel’s name in reference to the volume in which they are collected (see the Works Cited), even if a particular fragment was not written by Schlegel. Other abbreviations will be as follows:

Critical Fragments: CF

Literary Notebooks: LN

Miscellaneous Remarks (by Novalis, also titled *Grains of Pollen*): MR

demand” (“Ideality” xii). Ultimately, Gasché argues, the romantic fragment takes on the Kantian problem of the presentation of the idea—that is, of the presentation of totality—*as* fragment, because the idea as such permits no other possible presentation (“Ideality” xxiv-xxviii).

An idea of the literary work orients the enterprise of the fragments, especially in regard to the mutual reflection of fragment and system (fragments are systems and systems are fragments). This can be seen most clearly in romanticism’s most emblematic fragment, penned by Novalis: “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine” (*AF* 206). The intrinsic determination of the fragment *as* fragment makes it freely self-positing in its individuality, like Kant’s notion of the purposive artwork, and like the total system of which it would be a part. Fragments are like little autonomous works of art. Works, on the other hand, are fragments: “The art of writing books, Novalis writes again, “has not yet been invented. But it is on the point of being invented. Fragments of this kind are literary seed-houses. True, there may be many a barren grain among them. But meanwhile, if a few germinate...” (Novalis, *MR* 104). The books we know in this fragmented age (or “chemical age” as Schlegel calls it) are but the seeds of a future Work; we are in the position of waiting for a Work to come, for a kind of classicism of the future (*AF* 147; 243). “A work is cultivated,” Schlegel writes, “when it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible; when it is completely faithful to itself, entirely homogenous, and nonetheless exalted above itself” (*AF* 297). Like the fragment, the work is both limited by its form and finds in its form its occasion for participation in the infinite; form renders the work at once internally coherent (“homogenous”), incomplete (“sharply delimited”), internally infinite, especially in auto-production and self-reflection (“inexhaustible”), and externally projected (“exalted above itself”).

As a seed, finally, the fragment invokes its own plurality and dispersal, just as it seeks an overcoming of this plurality in the universality of a future age and a total Work. There is never one fragment; there are only fragments. Yet “ce pluriel est le mode spécifique par lequel le fragment vise, indique et d’une certaine façon pose le singulier de la totalité,” Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explain (*AL* 64/44). Fragments communicate with one another as if in dialogue, in “a chain or garland” (*AF* 77), or according to a model of sociality. For all these reasons, the fragments not only implicate a thinking of literary form, but, in their plurality, a thinking of genre, and ultimately of the genre of Literature as such. Literature as genre becomes “not the sum but the co-presence of [its] parts, the co-presence ... of the whole with itself” (*AL* 64/44). In short, in its plurality the romantic fragment reveals the intimate relation between the problem of the form of the work, the identity and ideality of genre, and that of the identity of the genre of Literature as such. Each is completely bound up with the other; when we ask “what is literature?” we are entangled with all of these questions at once.

All of the above is not to say that the fragments communicate a logic that is entirely coherent. But they do participate in an economy of production and reflection that draws directly on the Third *Critique*, one organized by what I would describe as the two figurative poles of the seed and the mirror. In “Economimesis” Derrida analyzes the *Critique of Judgment* as providing two means of reconciling or overcoming the “inherited, ossified, simplified opposition between *tekhnè* and *physis*,” or the “play of freedom” that supposedly belongs to art and the “mechanical necessity” attributed to nature. The first reconciliation is by means of an analogy between two orders of production: Derrida identifies a *mimesis* or analogy between the production of man, who makes artworks “through freedom, i.e. through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason” (Kant §43), whose works “must still seem to be as free

from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature” (§45); and that of nature, to whose productions we can not ascribe any teleological causality. This is one function of reflection in the third *Critique*, and “analogy” is certainly the right term here, for it indicates the resemblance or correspondence of two processes, here the processes of free productivity; it is a “specular relation between two liberties” (Derrida, “Economimesis” 10). Yet, as I described above, according to Kant we conceive of the coherency of nature not through any possible experience, but on the basis of another kind of specular relation: this one turns to the integrity of the artwork, to its purposiveness without purpose, for an image of the integrity of nature. Art does not imitate nature in the sense of producing a likeness (for that would make artistic production beholden to the image of an end); but the form of art is the only occasion we have to reflect on or be “conscious of” the purposiveness of nature (Kant, First Introduction §IX). Following Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, I would like to emphasize the distinction between form or *Bild* (image, representation) and formation, *Bildung*, for there is a double reflection at work in the relation of art to nature. What is formal in a work of art provides an image (*Bild*) of the purposiveness of nature, while nature, conversely, provides the analogy of a process or formation (*Bildung*) of freedom. Between *Bild* and *Bildung*, or form and formation, or product and process, lies the entire problematic of the romantic fragment, as well as the conflict of freedom and necessity that constitutes the basis of the romantic conception of art.

Let us complete this description of reflection in the third *Critique*. The double reflection between art and nature in Kant is organized by a second instance, that of the gift or seed. What I term “seed” here is the production and donation of genius, nature’s gift to man that “blossoms” (§47) in artistic production. “Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art”; “Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art” (§46), read Kant’s well-

known lines. As Derrida argues, genius both accounts for the passage between freedoms, and naturalizes artistic production, for it returns artistic production—in fact, it returns the very difference between the two orders of production—to the natural order. Derrida emphasizes the “gift” status of genius in order to draw attention to the paradoxical relation of what is supposedly outside any economic circuit—the gift—to a whole hierarchical economy of labor in Kant’s system. I would like to emphasize instead the natural element of genius, its genetic function for art and its origin in natural production. “Genius” (*Genie*) comes from the Latin, originally from the base form *gen-* and the root *gignere*, to beget. In the concept of genius, we have the begetting of—the very genesis of—man’s productive freedom and thus his difference from the natural order, but only on the condition that this freedom correspond analogically to that of nature’s, and provide example to future geniuses. In other words, the production of difference between man and nature is based on the system of nature, and (as we saw above), is recuperated in a series of analogical reflections of freedoms.²³ I describe genius as a seed because the term enables us to draw a direct connection to the figural language of the romantic fragments. But most importantly, the notion of the seed encapsulates these two elements of production and reflection, and reveals the ground of their reconciliation: the seed is the productive and donative instance of nature, but more specifically of an *organism*; it is also the organism in miniature, and its development is controlled by this image of the organism, as well the very ideality of the organic.

If we return to Fragment 206, we can see this entire figural economy of the seed and the mirror played out in romantic terms. “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself

²³ While genius entails originality (§46) and “is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation” (§47), the product of genius becomes “an example ... for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art” (§49).

like a porcupine” (Schlegel, *AF* 206). Here we can see the specular relation: the fragment is not a work but merely *like* a work. At the same time, specularity would threaten to displace rather than to establish unity, as the fragment’s claim of being “complete in itself” is immediately belied or supplemented with an analogy to the porcupine—an analogy that, drawing its force from the organic or the living organism, in turn offers a new image of the organization of the whole. Everywhere the romantic fragments shuttle back and forth between the mirror and the seed, the specular and the organic, the reflective and the productive. The relationship of fragment and totality takes place under the double aegis of these metaphors: rather than a dialectic of part and whole, we see the specular reflection of the whole in the form of the fragment, and the formation of these fragments into a whole whose genesis lies in the fragments’ excessive and universalizing tendencies (fragments are seeds of systems).

To point out the importance of organicism to romantic thought is, of course, no revelation; in 1941 Lovejoy named it as one of romanticism’s defining features (“Meaning”). Yet a closer look at the function of this concept is warranted. In the next section, we will turn briefly to Coleridge and Coleridge’s legacy in the English tradition to better understand the stakes of the notion of organic form. What I would like to emphasize for the time being is the thinking of the organic at work in the romantic fragments. The organicism of the fragments is the basis of the for-itself of their production, for while they belong to the horizon of a system, to the exigency of completion and the “will to system,” they simultaneously strive to be autonomously self-positing. What constitutes their individuality is the capacity for self-production and self-formation (*AL* 69-70/49). Fragments are likened not only to seeds, but to self-forming, autonomous subjects. Yet self-formation not only grounds the fragments’ individuality, but “incompletes” them by turning their very individuality into something to be constructed—in other words, a project. Thus in their infinite

incomplete-completion, the fragments again reflects the totality as an infinite work-in-progress.

The flip side of this incompleteness, of course, is the threat of a formlessness or chaos. “L’origine romantique, c’est ainsi le toujours-déjà-perdu de l’Organon” (72/50). This is what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call romanticism’s most specific gesture: “celui par lequel au sein même de la quête ou de la théorie de l’oeuvre il abandonne ou retranche ... l’Oeuvre même—et se mue de façon à peine perceptible en ‘oeuvre de l’absence d’oeuvre’ (80/57). Fragments can be read as the mark of the absence of the work, inscribed against a background of chaos. In this reading they sketch the formation of this absence, and the outline of its contours.

The double exigency of form and formation, reflection and production, is clearly at work in other manifestations of early German romanticism. Following the *Fragments*, the publication of the *Ideas* in 1800 marked the Jena group’s reconsideration of the problem of form, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest (184/61); most importantly, it designated a certain supposed relation between “imitation” and “creation” (190/66). The idea appears as a “moralization” of the fragment (*ibid.*), adopting the style of an injunction directed toward a listener. This injunction figures the artist in the form of the “exemplarity” of the one who speaks, and who speaks the truth. In the moral fragment, creation and imitation are put into relation, but only on the ground of an appeal to a society of exemplary subjects as the totality to which it, as fragmentary morality, would belong.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy locate the “fulfillment” of the moral genre of the fragment in the dialogue (269/86), and focus on Friedrich Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry* and August Schlegel’s Berlin lectures on art and literature (1801-1802). Part of what is in question in their analysis is the institutionalization of the ideas of the Jena group, their introduction into the university with August Schlegel’s lectures, and

consequently the institutional accountability for the question of what literature *is*. Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue* is also capable of posing this question, where previously both the *Fragments* and the *Ideas* were unable. The form of the dialogue can allow the critical question of literature to arise within it, and hence appears as a veritable staging of the encounter between philosophy and poetry, or of the Idea and its sensible presentation—and even of the attempt at sublating these very differences (85). In this way, the dialogue appears as a good candidate for the Absolute genre. Yet what a simple dialogue lacks is the presentation of the putting-into-form of the relation of the two positions: in other words, a narrative presentation of dialogue (which F. Schlegel in fact employs). Ultimately, the *novel* will be venerated as the genre capable of overcoming the bifold nature of the dialogue in a true synthesis of form. The novel alone, the “romantic book” (Schlegel, “Letter” 293), is cable of reflecting on itself and on its own genre, and of comprehending the law of its own engenderment (*AL* 275/90).

But the novel proves unsatisfactory in the end. It remains a mixed genre, seems artificial and hence is unable to achieve true organicity (286/98). The novel is unable to synthesize, “beyond mixture,” the various genres it contains—poetry, prose, drama—because it lacks the possibility of an effective presentation of its own synthetic principle (286/99). In this way, the novel introduces a certain problem of “hyperbolization,” as I will discuss in Chapter [on Proust]. What it lacks, in short, is a *theoretical* space that can do the work of reflection and synthesis, that can reflect on the relation between form (poetry) and the idea of the infinite (philosophy), while also maintaining their difference. In the end, the novel's inevitable failure to absolutize itself is what opens the space for literary criticism.

“L'impératif critique porte à son comble l'exigence fragmentaire,” write Lacoue Labarthe and Nancy (389/116). The relation of the work to criticism is

entirely bound up with the logic of the fragment. And it is the economy of the seed and the mirror that allows us to read the central importance of criticism in romanticism—criticism or “theory,” after all, is the genre in which the bulk of the early romantics’ writing takes place. Most significantly, the investment in criticism testifies to the importance of reflection for the early romantics: for them, reflection is not only the form of thinking *par excellence*, but a structure proper to their notion of the absolute.²⁴ As Walter Benjamin argues, while Fichte argued for the unity of Kant’s system by grounding it in the self-reflection of an absolute subject, the romantics, by contrast, conceived of the activity of reflection itself as “logically first and primary,” the originary medium of the absolute (Benjamin 134). The art object is of the utmost importance for the romantics’ conception of the absolute: because any object within the absolute is the occasion for the self-thinking of thought, objects are properly understood as determinations of reflection; they can be said to be “thinking themselves.” Following Kant’s concern with aesthetics as the locus of a problem of reason, the work of art in romanticism becomes the most privileged determination of reflection, a site where the presentation of a process in a determinate form coincides with the occasion for critical (self-) reflection. The form of a work, in other words, is a self-limitation that makes possible its internal reflection (Benjamin 156), as well as its external projection or participation in genre, and ultimately in the idea of Literature as such.

The “critical imperative” of romanticism, in short, is occasioned by a notion of the work as fragment. Criticism seeks simultaneously to complete and incomplete the literary work with reflective commentary, so that on the one hand, it aims in a totalizing gesture to “seize the whole of the work” (*AL* 389/116) and account for its

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the role of reflection in romanticism, its relation to thinking and to the structure of self-consciousness, see Chapter Four.

process in an overarching form, and on the other, to supplement and overcome the limits of the individual work in a process of thought in which the work would merely be a part or moment. In this way, criticism simultaneously belongs to the totality of the individual work and to a project of incompleteness, as well as to an absolutization of the two, projecting an image of an ideal or absolute Work that would be capable of absorbing its own criticism, theorizing itself and reflecting on itself, and thus effectively exclude any supplemental discourse. In self-reflection, the work would become “complete in itself,” like the hedgehog. This impetus of absolutization is also at work in criticism that claims to respond “creatively” to works of literature.

Yet because criticism appears in the absence of an absolute Work, it is doubly determined: on the one hand, it participates in the work’s “auto-illumination,” the work’s self-showing of its operation of forming. But on the other hand, in supplementing the work, criticism marks the absence of a complete Work; in attempting to give form to formation it risks indicating “the absence of Form in all form, and demands that Form be restored, completed, or supplemented in any given form” (376/105). In this sense criticism is in the same position with regard to the auto-illuminating absolute as the fragment is to the totality, acting both as the “part” that incompletes the whole and the monument to the always-already-lost of this whole.

In short, the two poles of the self-production and self-reflection of the literary work point the way to a literary Absolute that would resemble a “Subject-Work,” an organic totality capable of freely producing itself in a form and freely reflecting on itself in self-consciousness—what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy also call the critical identity of the work with its own criticism (384/112). Yet in its reliance on form as a necessary component of the reflective absolute, this critical identity simultaneously marks the incompleteness, and ultimately the failure, of its own project. We have seen that reflection gives the artwork access to the infinite. In reflecting on itself and in

giving itself to reflection, the work attempts to approach a reconciliation of the tension between necessity and freedom, form and formation, that we traced to Kant's conception of the subject. In fact, it only succeeds in perpetuating—indeed, in absolutizing—this tension. The romantic literary work is made the locus and privileged icon of an indissoluble metaphysical tension.

CHAPTER TWO, PART ONE:
MONISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

To speak broadly for a moment, and to bring all of this back to contemporary literary studies: How many critical approaches to literature continue to be bound by this same metaphysical and romantic tension—that is, in a variety of investigations, continue to be bound by the opposing poles of necessity on the one hand and freedom on the other? Such questions, for example, that assume an alternative—even if only to negotiate it—between a notion of literature as either a unitary form or a free and spontaneous creation? As either product or process? As either object of study or phenomenological experience? As governed by a poetics—that is, a set of self-given laws that describe its formation—or by a “poetry”—a beautiful form? Moreover, is this tension not at the heart of the entrenched opposition between symbol and allegory, where the symbol has been used to invoke a necessary identification, and allegory disparaged as contingent and lacking cohesion?²⁵ Finally, does this opposition not govern inquiries that suppose a conflict between the originality of a work and its participation in literary history? Between a work as an unprogrammable event, and the work’s determining social and political circumstances, or social and political consequences? Between a work’s potentially infinite effects and its author’s original intentions? And this list might be extended.

In what follows, I would like to examine a few cases in which this opposition of freedom and necessity is brought into sharp relief in discussions of the role of criticism and its treatment of the literary work. My goal will be to demonstrate that what appear to be diverse or even opposed critical trends are collaborating in

²⁵ I have in mind Paul de Man’s well-known arguments in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.”

perpetuating the same romantic problematic. My first case in point is American New Criticism and the terms of its rejection as a dominant critical paradigm.

I. The New Critical Object

The lasting contribution of the so-called New Critics, as well as the basis of their repudiation in the hands of subsequent trends, has undoubtedly been their insistence on the complex unity of the literary work and its autonomy from other discourses, two features that necessitated a practice of close reading as the central activity of literary criticism. They have subsequently been accused of removing the literary object from the domains of history and human psychology, as well as from comprehensive accounts of language and meaning-production. Consider Terry Eagleton's exemplary remarks in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983):

To call for close reading, in fact, is to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather than to something else: to the 'words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them... [Close reading] encouraged the illusion that any piece of language, literary or not, can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation. It was the beginnings of a "reification" of the literary work, the treatment of it as an object in itself, which was to be triumphantly consummated in the American New Criticism. (44)

Here Eagleton moves swiftly from the isolation of the literary text to its hypostatization, which he condemns in both Marxist and metaphysical terms, referring to the "reification" of the work and its treatment as an "object in itself."²⁶ Yet is the

²⁶ Of course, these comments can be read as equivalent insofar as Marxist critique aims precisely at notions supposed to be metaphysical in order to expose them as mystifications. Nevertheless, I think it is important to hold on to the double edge of Eagleton's critique: that New Criticism makes the political

hypostatization of a poem the full extent of the problem? What is at stake in treating a text as an object, and, most importantly, what kind of objects were the New Critics dealing with?

According to Eagleton, in New Criticism a poem is made to seem “less like a process of meaning than something with four corners and a pebbledash front” (49): a process is mistaken for a material object, and judging by the use of the term “pebbledash,” it is domesticated, made quotidian, and treated superficially. Eagleton likely has Cleanth Brooks in mind, whose predilection for urns—Donne’s, Shakespeare’s, Keats’, Gray’s—is hard to overlook. A moment later, however, Eagleton’s comments take on a different cast: “The New Critical poem, like the Romantic symbol, was thus imbued with an absolute mystical authority which brooked no rational argument. ... New Criticism was at root a full-blooded irrationalism, one closely associated with religious dogma” (49). Here, as Eagleton considers the “Heresy of Paraphrase,” he likens the New Critical poem to a religious or other-worldly object. Yet how can the same object be domesticated and supernaturalized at the same time?

Eagleton’s remarks are actually quite revealing of the contradictory imperatives at work in New Criticism itself, and he is right to link New Criticism to an investment in the romantic symbol. Frank Lentricchia makes the same connection in *After the New Criticism*, comparing the New Critics’ removal of the poem from ordinary language to the romantic distinction between symbol and allegory:

From Coleridge to Mallarmé, from Yeats to Cleanth Brooks, Philip Wheelwright, and Northrop Frye, a dualism very like that between symbol and allegory is carried through as a distinction between the poetic or

error of removing the poem from the processes of history, and the metaphysical error of substantializing a process of meaning.

literary and the scientific or ordinary kinds of discourses. Brooks told us that it was heretical to paraphrase; within the perspective afforded by romantic tradition we may come to feel that the urgency in his injunction is motivated by a long-standing romantic need to protect a quasi-religious, ontological sanctuary from all secularizing discourses that would situate literature in history. (Lentricchia 6)

The romantic symbol itself, for both Eagleton and Lentricchia, is the proper “symbol” of the New Critical poem, of its mode of autonomy and means of internal integrity. The valorization of symbol over allegory in romanticism is consistent with what we have seen as the post-Kantian attempt to integrate the sensible and the intelligible, the fragment with totality, in a unified presentation; the symbol is evoked as a means of integration by Kant himself in his description of “aesthetic ideas,” which seek the presentation of ideas of reason (§49). For Goethe and other German writers of the age, the symbol was the poetic revelation of the general by means of the particular (Fletcher 13-17). Similarly, for Samuel Coleridge, who imported this valorization into the English tradition, the symbol was a sensuous object that “partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible,” while allegory was “nothing but an abstraction” (Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* 30). For both Coleridge and the Germans, the symbol was “founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests” (de Man 189).

The “intimate unity” of the symbol is the key operator here: the symbol was a necessary union of image and idea, while allegory, conversely, was an externally and mechanically motivated association. Most importantly for Coleridge, the privilege of the symbol resulted from his notion of organic form, as I will discuss shortly. We can see the connection to the total poem in Cleanth Brooks’ “The Heresy of Paraphrase” in what for Brooks is the marriage of a poem’s form and meaning, so that the abstraction

of a poem's idea and its translation into logical discourse betrays this union and misunderstands "the relation of the poem to its 'truth'" (Brooks 201). Yet a New Critical poem is not merely a symbol. Let us look more closely now at Brooks' notion of what constitutes the unity of a poem.

"[T]he language of poetry is the language of paradox," (3) begins Brooks' essay of the same name, suggesting that the form of a poem might likewise be the form of paradox. In fact, this is not the case. Brooks refers instead to paradoxes that "inform" a poem, to "the paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises" (5); and in his discussion of Wordsworth, we see that the term is used to describe the scenes and situations that constitute a poem's thematic material (4-5). Paradox is the matrix of poetry, in short, but not its destination. By the end of the essay Brooks describes the "paradox of the imagination itself" (21)—the imagination being that Colridgian power of "reconcil[ing] opposite or discordant qualities" (18), so that the discord of paradox is relegated to the poem's creative impulse (imagination), the language on which it draws, and its pre-poetic situations (situations that "give rise" to and inform poetry). In this way Brooks actually expels paradox from poetic form, placing it on a hierarchical continuum of process and product. He seeks instead an image of the work in the figure of a funereal urn containing the ashes of discordant elements ("the urn to which we are summoned," he writes of Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle," "is the poem itself" [20-21]).

Interestingly enough, it appears to be Brooks' own valorization of the symbol that inspires his reasoning—and, as we will see, that ends up problematizing it. "The poet has to work by analogies," he writes. "All of the subtler states of emotion ... necessarily demand metaphor for their expression" (9). Here Brooks recalls the romantic notion of the poet's task as that of "mak[ing] sensible rational ideas of invisible entities (Kant §49). The "necessity of the demand" of metaphor is an appeal

to the essential unity of an abstraction and its corresponding image. For Coleridge, the necessity of the poetic symbol lay in a kind of vertical union or “translucence”: “[A] Symbol ... is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal” (*Lay Sermons* 30). Colridge’s symbol is more than a synecdoche, representing the totality to which it belongs; like the apex of a cone, it is at once the unity of part and whole and a privileged perspective on that whole, the overlapping, condensation and fusion of the special and the general.

Yet we can see how the very intimacy of this union, along with the notion of the symbol as fragment (fragments, remember, are always multiple) would complicate the picture of any poem that is greater than a single image. For it leaves open the question of how multiple symbols are to relate to one another laterally, especially within the context of a single poem. If Brooks retains the necessary unity and plurality of the symbol but disregards what may have been a generally nineteenth-century taste for universals, he will have to face this question. In fact, it seems to be the very basis for “The Language of Paradox.” He writes that the poet’s only “terms” are metaphors, yet “the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes, necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think (9-10). For Brooks, paradox becomes the poet’s “inevitable instrument” because there is no unified plane of metaphorical expression; the poet must continually juxtapose his terms, working “by contradiction and qualification” (9). In this case, what constitutes the form of the poem as a whole—that is, what guarantees the sense of the juxtapositions—must be the intention of the poet, for only the category of intention can account for the activity of selection and meaningful

juxtaposition of metaphors such that one could be said to be “qualified” by another. The notion of qualification, in other words, relies on an intention behind the arrangement. The poet is like a masterful lawn bowler, Brooks suggests (taking another figure from Shakespeare)(10), working by indirection but aiming nevertheless. Poetic form is here equated with poetic aim.

It is generally understood that the category of authorial intention was effectively disbarred from literary criticism by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their landmark essay on the “Intentional Fallacy” (1946), and that the rejection of intention as a standard for critical judgment is a defining characteristic of the New Criticism on the whole. So how do we pass from “The Language of Paradox” to the “Intentional Fallacy”? In fact, Brooks’s position, in which the details of a poem must be related to a “total intention” (*Understanding Poetry* 491), is not only reconcilable with Wimsatt and Beardsley’s expulsion of intention from poetic form, but leads inexorably to it; and both positions are consistent with a trajectory that begins with Samuel Coleridge.

II. The Book of the World

In “The Language of Paradox,” we have seen how Brooks relegates paradox to the space of the creative imagination, drawing on Coleridge explicitly, here as elsewhere in his writing, to define the imagination as what “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete, the idea, with the image...” (qtd. 18; from *Biographia Literaria* II 12). For Coleridge, the poetic imagination is poetry’s “seminal principle” (*Biographia Literaria* I 64): that “vital” power of synthesis that strives “to idealize and to unify” its objects, and to transform these objects in the service of a vision or a passion (202).²⁷ It is a specialized mode of the “primary

²⁷ “It has been before observed that images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature,

imagination” at work in all human perception, and seems to be distinguished from the inferior power of fancy by the necessity of its relations. Fancy, by contrast, Coleridge maintains, is not transformative (272 n.18), but “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association,” and in this way, he suggests, is nothing more than a mode of memory (202).

In his discussion of the “law of association” in Chapters V and VI of the *Biographia Literaria*, we see most acutely what is at issue for Coleridge in distinguishing the imagination from fancy. The law of association, which governs fancy, describes relations that are passive and mechanical (that is, governed by efficient causes). When Coleridge glosses Hobbs by writing: “whenever we feel several objects at the same time, the impressions that are left... are linked together,” and “contemporaneous impressions... recall each other mechanically” (68-69), he is emphasizing the contingency of these associations, forged in the coincidence of proximity in time and space. Taking issue with David Hartley’s philosophy, Coleridge asserts that if association were the sole governing law of our mental life, we would be “divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory” (77); we would find ourselves either in a state of “absolute *delirium*,” where our ideas would be strung together in the same order as our lived encounters, or in a condition of total saturation, in which “*any* part of *any* impression might recall *any* part of *any other* without a cause present to determine *what* it should be” (ibid.). In the latter case we begin to suspect what the real issue is for Coleridge: the law of association risks leading not only to the delirium of senseless relations, but to the senselessness (or “lawlessness”) of an infinity of possible relations given without any principle of selection.

and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of an original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion” (*Biographia Literaria* II 16).

Although Coleridge's discussion is ostensibly about the psychology of associationism, we see in what follows that the stakes are not so much psychological as textual. The poet goes on to tell the story of a young woman who falls ill and, though illiterate, begins raving in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. She is suspected of demonic possession, but it turns out she is merely recalling scraps of her childhood spent in the care of a pastor who used to pace back and forth in his house reading aloud to himself in these same languages. As the girl speaks in feverish sentences "coherent and intelligible each for itself, but with little or no connection with each other" (78), she rehearses that state of delirium Coleridge described above, where ideas are ordered by mere association in memory. The pastor's pacing prefigures the woman's delirium, which plucks sentences at random from his books; and the whole scenario suggests to Coleridge the possibility that "all thoughts are in themselves imperishable" (79), and that a more comprehensive intelligence than ours might recall "before every human soul the collective experience of its whole past existence" (80). The terrible aspect of this idea is brought to the fore as Coleridge continues, "And this, this, perchance, is the dread book of judgement, in whose mysterious hieroglyphics every idle word is recorded!" (ibid.). A world in which nothing perishes is likened to the indelible record-keeping described in Revelations, to God's infinite book that, in containing everything, is utterly unintelligible to us. The book of judgment serves as a compelling figure of unreadability: its "hieroglyphs" invoke the specter of reading that has been replaced by a brute seeing, a "material vision," "devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication ... devoid of any semantic depth" (de Man, "Phenomenality" 83). For what would a book be that recorded every human word and deed—a book, in short, that was coextensive with the world? It would be nothing other *than* the material world, a script without semantic depth. When Coleridge concludes, in a very German Idealist moment, by referring to "that living chain of causes" to which the

“absolute self is co-extensive and co-present” (80), he confirms this sentiment conjured in the reference to the “mysterious hieroglyphs” of God’s book: that a world in which matter and spirit coincided absolutely is one in which no design would be intelligible, at least not to a finite intellect, and one which might, in fact, be indistinguishable from a world without design altogether.

Coleridge’s discussion of the law of association, in short, leads him straight to a world without poetry, for a poem whose “seminal principle” is passive and contingent association, whose mode of causality is thereby efficient causality rather than final (81), runs this same risk that goes from the possible inclusion of *anything* to the eventual inclusion of *everything*. And like the book of the world, the poem that includes the entire world would not look much like a poem at all. In contrast to the associative power of fancy, Coleridge champions the poetic imagination, which he joins to the conscious will.

Much of Coleridge’s thinking on the imagination arises from his need to assert the genius and originality of Shakespeare. In his lecture “Shakespeare’s Judgment Equal to his Genius,” for example, Coleridge’s stated purpose is to upset the “popular notion” that Shakespeare was a “wild child of nature” operating “by a sort of instinct,” and to demonstrate that his achievements were the result of conscious design (319-320). In this same short lecture, however, we also find the most extensive statement of Coleridge’s notion of organic form, which, as Paul de Man points out in “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,” would seem to run counter to, and even be imperiled by, the principle of intentionality (28). De Man suggests that, given Coleridge’s investment in the organic analogy, his treatment of intention remains ambiguous and ambivalent, and, moreover, that this “ambivalence reappears among [New Critical] disciples of Coleridge, in a curious discrepancy between their theoretical assumptions and their practical results” (ibid.). Yet, if we may continue

with Coleridge for a minute, I would like to consider the relationship between these two positions in Coleridge's understanding—that is, between intentionality and organicism—so that we might draw out the logic that links the two together.

In "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to his Genius," it is clear that the power of Shakespeare does not run counter to nature; rather, it is something "true in human nature," "founded in faculties common to all men," and thus to be contrasted with the "accidents of education" and enslaving "habits of ... immediate circumstance" (320). This discussion is consistent with Coleridge's definition of the poetic imagination as a special degree of the "primary imagination" common to all men, and it repeats the distinction we have seen between the necessity of imagination and the contingency of fancy, or association. The foundation of Shakespeare's genius in nature is crucial for Coleridge, for only in this way are readers left with "rules for imitation," and "principles" to which they can refer critical judgment; thus Coleridge will write that Shakespeare is no natural force but "a nature humanized" (321). Here Coleridge's arguments are clearly indebted to Kant's treatment of genius, which, being the "natural gift that gives the rule to art," as we have seen, functions as the vital fulcrum between two productions, that is, between the productivity of nature and the productivity of man, between nature's donation of genius and man's artistic production, or between the donative and the exemplary instances of a comprehensive productive economy.

The work of genius is not and cannot be lawless, Coleridge continues, broaching the topic of organic unity. It cannot be "barbarous shapelessness" compensated for only by the "splendor of the parts"; rather, parts and whole together form a "living body." As the imagination is a "vital power" and not the "lifeless mechanism" of association, so its product is a living organism, one whose form is not predetermined and imposed from without, but "is innate; it shapes itself as it develops

itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” (321). As Coleridge acknowledges obliquely by referring to “a continental critic,” these lines are taken nearly directly from August Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*.²⁸

“Such is the life,” Coleridge writes, “such the form” (321). Conscious intention and organic unity are not only practically but necessarily continuous, I would argue, in accordance with the logic of the organic itself. The organic is what underlies what we referred to earlier as the two poles of the “economimesis” of Kant’s third *Critique*, those of nature’s donation and genius’ exemplarity, or production and reflection, and unifies them in a single, productive economy. The notion of the organic *is* the joining of production and reflection on a single plane of development, and may in fact have no other purpose than to address and guarantee the unity of this apparent discrepancy. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that “the organic,” or “organic form,” or even the “organism,” may be no more than a catechistic operation for the identification of production and reflection, process and telos, or rather, a process and its culmination in the for-itself of reflection. When Coleridge refers to the “esemplastic” imagination in order to highlight the function of the imagination to “shape into one” (*Biographia Literaria* I 107), he is asserting just this unity of intention and form, and he undergirds this unity by grounding the poetic imagination in a natural process (the primary imagination), as we have seen. This is the same unity that Coleridge will alternately assert as that of “genius” and “judgment,” “power” and “beauty,” or the “spirit of poetry” and its “body” (“Shakespeare” 321).

At the same time, and ultimately in keeping with the third *Critique*, the poetic imagination is not itself a natural process, but must retain its intentional status—it

²⁸ Delivered in Vienna in 1808 and published in 1809-1811. The lines in question read: “Organical form, again, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and acquires its determination contemporaneously with the perfect development of the germ” (A. Schlegel 241).

must be a “nature humanized.” In other words, the organic analogy must remain exactly that—the analogical reflection of an artificial process. Likewise, the primary imagination is not continuous with eternal creation, but reflects it “*as a repetition.*” For what Coleridge risks in following through on his own assertions that “the fullness of [a work’s] development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” is a collapse of the very distinctions between form and formlessness, or necessity and contingency, imagination and fancy, that he has gone to such lengths to establish, and a return to the scenario implied by the hieroglyphs of the “dread book of judgment,” where a total coincidence of “development” and “form” would render all reading impossible. This is the extreme point to which Coleridge’s monism leads him: the absolute unity of matter and spirit in poetry, that is, the absolute coincidence of form and intention, would lead to a material script that was no longer legible, or to a poetry that was continuous with, and therefore indistinguishable from, the material world. In this case the necessity at stake in the poetic imagination actually comes around full circle to meet the contingency of association at its point of greatest saturation.

Coleridge will recoil from the implications of this monism, and will maintain a dualism of consciousness and world. Yet it is the logic of this organic analogy, taken a step further perhaps, that underlies the treatment of intention in New Criticism, and allows us to make sense of the passage from Brooks to Wimsatt and Beardsley. For if intentionality is what gives unity to Cleanth Brooks’s paradoxes on the one hand, and on the other if Wimsatt and Beardsley appear to banish intention from the poem in order to pay closer attention to “the text itself,” both positions are in fact direct consequences of a monism that, as James Benziger puts it, “end[s] by limiting this spirit within the confines of the works it creates” (43).

Furthermore, in these consequences we can spot one of the most persistent

effects of the organic analogy, which is that in the identification of form and intention that the analogy implies, and in the exchange of qualities effected therein, intention is lent that aspect of unity previously reserved for form. In other words, the consequence of the organic analogy is the unification of intention itself. We see this at work in the *Biographia Literaria* when Coleridge responds to the question “what is poetry”? with the question “what is a poet?” (II 12), and when he continually reverts from a discussion of the poem to one of genius, imagination, and poetic aim: at one point, for example, he writes that “a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object [aim] being proposed (ibid. 8). In all of these cases, poetic aim is neatly substituted for poetic form.

These lines of Coleridge are close to those quoted by Brooks, who likewise sees the task of the poetic imagination being to govern the combination and juxtaposition of poetic elements. In giving priority to the unifying function of intention—indeed, in making the unity of a poem reside solely in the unity of intention, so that the latter is substituted for the former, Brooks can emphasize the paradoxical and complex character of poetic content as much as he wants, while the unity of poetic form remains undisturbed. And if Wimsatt and Beardsley appear to excise intention as a criteria for critical evaluation, this is only insofar as they make it wholly immanent to the text itself, so that they can claim, for example, that if an author revises his work to better achieve his original intention, “it follows that his former concrete intention was not his intention” (5). In this game of necessity and contingency, to make intention coincide absolutely with its expression, and to substitute it for the poem in this way, has the effect of forcing something else into the realm of the contingent—in this case the biographical details of the poet’s life—as well as of shoring up the internal necessity of the critical object.

CHAPTER TWO, PART TWO

BLANCHOT: TYRRANY OF THE POSSIBLE

If the organic view of literature effects an exchange between the form of a work and its intention, that is, between the origin and the telos of a work in the image of a necessary process, there is another view of the work that, despite radical differences in its content, bears a structural similarity to this organicism insofar as it, too, seeks to exchange the origin of the work with its telos. I have in mind the writings of Maurice Blanchot, and their contribution to what will later be identified under the label of French poststructuralism.

No French-speaking writer or critic today invested in literary-philosophical questions can avoid Blanchot's tremendous insights or influence. Compared to American critical practice in the first half of the twentieth century, which even before the New Critics was systematically investigating methods of reading and interpretation, French criticism of the same period was less theoretical, remaining largely in the mode of *explication de texte*, if not biographical study (Cusset 47). Blanchot stands out radically as one of the first thinkers truly to pose the question of *reading*—though he did so by investigating traces of the writer's experience in the work more than the activity of the critic.

Geoffrey Hartman has suggested that “when we come to write the history of criticism for the 1940 to 1980 period, it will be found that Blanchot, together with Sartre, made French ‘discourse’ possible” (Hartman xi). In fact, Blanchot appears to stand at a privileged crossroads in critical history, for on the one hand, in view of his significance for Derrida, he has been called a “crude harbinger of deconstruction” (Clark 78), “déconstructioniste avant la lettre” (Nordholt 11), and on the other hand, “one of the last romantics,” insofar as his work sustains a mode of questioning that

remains “irreducible or excessive with respect to the Enlightenment’s unfinished project” (Bruns xv).

Champion of the incomplete, the impossible, the unsaid, and the non-totalizable in language, Blanchot has devoted his work not only to those practitioners of a formally fragmentary writing—Nietzsche, Mallarmé, René Char, for example—but to a concept of writing that is intimately bound to the fragmentary and the excessive in its very essence. On the question of Blanchot’s relation to and distance from romanticism, and specifically to the fragments of the Jena romantics, his essay “*L’Athenaeum*”—a major source for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s *L’absolu littéraire*, as I mentioned earlier—proves indispensable. Here Blanchot identifies a tendency toward closure in the romantic fragment, and draws out three points which can also be read as a fairly decisive articulation of Blanchot’s own differences from romanticism—or, perhaps, what will lead him to identify with what he calls “l’essence non romantique du romantisme” (*L’entretien infini* 524/357). We will trace these points schematically before addressing key concepts in more detail.

I. The Closure of Romanticism

The closure of the romantic fragment, according to Blanchot, hangs on the following tendencies:

- 1) à considérer le fragment comme un texte concentré, ayant son centre en lui-même et non pas dans le champ que constituent avec lui les *autres* fragments; 2) à négliger l’intervalle ... qui sépare les fragments et fait de cette séparation le principe rythmique de l’oeuvre ... 3) à oublier que cette manière d’écrire ne tend pas à rendre plus difficile une vue d’ensemble ou plus lâches des relations d’unité, mais à rendre possible des rapports nouveaux qui s’exceptent de l’unité, comme ils

excédent l'ensemble. (527/359)

The first point describes the tendency of the romantic fragment to take on the gravity and closure of the aphorism, or of the perfect sentence (ibid.)—whence Novalis' claim that it can be “complete in itself like a porcupine.” As Blanchot claims elsewhere, the aphorism exhibits a power of limitation and enclosure: “forme qui est en forme d'horizon, son propre horizon” (228/152). In place of the self-centered aphorism, Blanchot proposes an ex-centric discourse, where what is said relates essentially to what is outside it. The second point reformulates the complaint of the first by shifting emphasis to the constitutive power of the interval between the fragments. In place of a proliferation of centers, Blanchot seeks a notion of ex-centricity internal to the work or to the discursive field itself—in other words, he seeks a notion of separation and distance as immanent and necessary rather than extraneous or accidental.

The third tendency is perhaps the most entrenched, and the most contradictory. Here Blanchot recalls the ease with which fragmentary writing can be re-totalized under the sign of the book, the journal, or the self. He writes, with a valence that we will have to determine later: “L'art romantique qui concentre la vérité créatrice dans la liberté du sujet, forme aussi l'ambition d'un livre total” (525/358). In Chapter 1 we have seen the tendency of the fragments to appear in collections (such as Schlegel's *Ideas* and Novalis's *Grains of Pollen*), and the gathering function of the *Athenaeum* journal as a site of the collection of collections; moreover, we have witnessed an investment in the novel as the “romantic book,” the genre capable of swallowing generic distinction, of synthesizing dialogue, and of providing the work with its “spiritual central point” (Schlegel, “Letter” 293). The romantic notion of the self, however, is the most ideal and most tenacious means of bringing a “whole” of the fragmentary into view. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy remark that the romantic fragments inherit from the English and French moralists—from the laxity of form in

their miscellaneous reflections, essays, and maxims—a means of centering their discourse “hors de l’oeuvre, dans le sujet qui s’y donne à voir ou dans le jugement qui y donne ses maximes” (*AL* 58/40). Here the self, especially the creative or moral self, serves as the transcendent sign that authorizes and anchors even the most extreme formal disorder, which in turn becomes merely an expression of personal disorder. Thus, as is particularly the case with Friedrich Schlegel, “le fragment paraît souvent un moyen de s’abandonner complaisamment à soi-même ... [d’]accueillir son propre désordre, se refermer sur son moi en un isolement satisfait” (Blanchot, *L’entretien* 526/359).

II. The Fragmentary Exigency

Formally or empirically fragmented writing alone is thus not equal to what Blanchot calls “l’exigence fragmentaire de l’oeuvre”: the demand for/of a mode of writing that would render the very accomplishment of a work problematic, along with the work’s concomitant concepts of unity, totality, and continuity (510/348). Blanchot seems to conceive of this writing as the true inheritance of the romantic project, a kind of discovery whose effects have only now become possible. In place of a view of fragmentation that would position the fragment in stark opposition to totality (only, perhaps, to idealize that totality all the more thoroughly), Blanchot pursues a mode of writing whose relations would be excepted from or in excess of the very possibility of totalization. The distinction Blanchot draws on here seems to be between two different manners of conceiving of the limits of totalization: as Derrida argues famously in “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,” a totality might be undone by an infinite number of instances that are impossible to gather up or account for; or, on the other hand, it might be logically excluded from a mode of organization. He writes:

Si la totalisation alors n'a plus de sens, ce n'est pas parce que l'infinité d'un champ ne peut être couverte par un regard ou un discours finis, mais parce que la nature du champ—à savoir le langage et un langage fini—exclut la totalisation ...[Ce champ], au lieu d'être trop grand, il lui manque quelque chose, à savoir un centre qui arrête et fonde le jeu des substitutions. (*L'écriture et la différence* 423/289)

The field Derrida refers to is, of course, the field of language conceived in structuralist terms as a horizontal system of differences without an anchoring term. Although Blanchot is not operating with the same structuralist conceptions, he has a comparable sense of literary language as lacking an “anchor” in the world, be it instrumentality or the requirements of truth or faithful representation. For Blanchot, the “fragmentary exigency” of the literary work issues from the particular and privileged nature of literary language: this language demands a rigorous mode of writing that, in its distance from the world, “lets itself speak,” and in so doing will let speak or reveal an “ambiguity” at the heart of language in general.

Drawing in part on Mallarmé's conception of poetic language, in part on German phenomenology, what Blanchot calls *writing* is supposed to challenge not only those notions of voice and presence that operate in everyday conceptions of language, and not only the limits of the “work” that such a writing would constitute, but to cut to the heart of all totalizing categories of human knowledge and experience: it is that by which “tout est mis en cause, et d'abord l'idée de Dieu, du Moi, du Sujet, puis de la Vérité et de l'Un, puis l'idée du Livre et de l'Oeuvre” (vii/xii).

The radicality of Blanchot's claims originates in his notion of language as a transcendental space of freedom and negativity: writing possesses “[une] force aléatoire d'absence” (ibid), a force liberated in its abstraction from the world. “Précisément rien est au travail dans les mots,” Blanchot writes elsewhere. “Les mots,

nous le savons, ont le pouvoir de faire disparaître les choses, de les faire apparaître en tant que disparues” (*L’espace littéraire* 41/43). This power to make things disappear that Blanchot attributes to representation in general, and subsequently the power to make appear the fact of disappearance itself, is perhaps most clearly articulated in his essay on “Les deux versions de l’imaginaire.” Following Heidegger’s conception of the realm of appearance of phenomena as that of the concealment of being, which in turn is grasped only in its withdrawal, Blanchot similarly pursues the question of phenomenal appearance—and likewise, of representation in language—as covering over the disappearance of being that is presumably the very condition of representation.²⁹ Challenging the view of the representational image as what comes “after” the sensory apprehension of an object, appearing in place of the object, Blanchot argues instead that the image reveals a displacement at the heart of the object or of being itself. The image uncovers “cette chose comme éloignement, la présente dans son absence, la saisissable parce qu’insaisissable, apparaissant en tant que disparue” (347/256). The image, in other words, points to the void that is its necessary condition, at the same time as it “grazes” [“effleure”] the object (345/255). According to Blanchot, these two aspects of representation constitute its “ambiguity.”

Representation’s ambiguity—its two possibilities or two “versions”—derive, Blanchot argues, from the double valence of negation. On the one hand, as in the case of communicative language or representational art, the word or image makes meaning possible through a negation of the particular: that “négation vivifiante, le travail idéal par lequel l’homme, capable de nier la nature, l’élève à un sens supérieur” (354-55/261). The particular is negated, in other words, for the sake of the concept. On the other hand, negation might be its own and only meaning: the non-recuperable absence

²⁹ For a lucid treatment of Blanchot’s relation to Heidegger, see Timothy Clark’s *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida’s Notion and Practice of Literature* (1992).

of meaning. “La mort est tantôt le travail de la vérité dans le monde,” Blanchot claims, “et tantôt la perpétuité de ce qui ne supporte ni commencement ni fin” (355/261). In other words, Blanchot seems to posit that if finitude is the horizon for human meaning and possibility, as Heidegger attests, then there is also a death that is the death of death, a night that is the *other* of night, an unfettered negativity as the absence of all horizon and all possibility. “[D]ans la mort se dissout aussi cette possibilité qu’est la mort,” he surmises. Death not only gives possibility, but “l’horreur de l’impossibilité” (355/261). Here Blanchot is akin to Bataille in his pursuit of a non-dialectical, utterly non-recuperable negativity.

The “two versions” of the imaginary come together in ambiguity and neutrality, where negativity is alternately revealed and concealed, or revealed in its concealment as determinate negation. And just as there are two versions of the imaginary, there are two versions of language, which Blanchot tends to address in conjunction with his readings of Mallarmé.³⁰ While in all language, “le mot n’a de sens que s’il nous débarrasse de l’objet qu’il nomme ... la parole a une fonction, non seulement représentative, mais destructive” (*La part du feu* 37/30), communicative language covers over this destruction with purportedly transparent meaning and instrumental purpose. In communication, language resembles a tool that disappears into its use (*Espace* 348/258). Literary language, on the other hand, has the potential to “appear”: to point to itself, to reveal the illusion of language’s immediacy, and hence the void at the heart of its functioning. *Writing* is another name for what literature reveals: a displacement of being at the origin of language, and an (effacement of the) inscription of this displacement as language’s most intimate functioning.

³⁰ See, for example, “Parole brute, parole essentielle,” in *L’espace littéraire* (34/38).

III. Nobody Knows the Greatest Hallmark of Language: That It Is Concerned Only with Itself³¹

When, in his essay on “*L’Athenaeum*,” Blanchot writes of the “non-romantic essence of romanticism,” he seems to designate this notion of *writing* as what was both concealed by romanticism and at the same time made possible by it, so that it emerges, strangely enough, as romanticism’s inevitable conclusion. The aesthetic autonomy that Kantian philosophy bequeathed to romanticism meant that literature gained the capacity to become visible for its own sake. Yet in this becoming-visible, it discovered no task or trait other than its own self-manifestation: “D’un côté,” Blanchot writes, “l’art et la littérature ne semblent avoir rien d’autre à faire qu’à se manifester, c’est à dire à s’indiquer, selon le mode obscur qui leur est propre: se manifester, s’annoncer, en un mot se communiquer” (521/355). But what does literature “communicate,” in communicating itself? Again Blanchot echoes Heidegger in his assertion that, in literature, “language speaks.” This is romanticism’s inevitable discovery, as well as its distinctly “non-romantic essence”:

que parler poétiquement, c’est rendre possible une parole non transitive qui n’a pas pour tâche de dire les choses (de disparaître dans ce qu’elle signifie), mais de (se) dire en (se) laissant dire, sans toutefois faire d’elle-même le nouvel objet de ce langage sans objet. (524/357)

This non-transitive language is like the broken tool, which, no longer ready-to-hand, suddenly becomes visible, writes Blanchot, *as an image*. In appearance it becomes its own resemblance and reflection, “la pure et simple ressemblance derrière laquelle il n’y a rien” (*Espace* 258-59).

Language as mute image of itself is an image of the whole of language. But we recall that, with his conception of “writing,” Blanchot exposes the displacement of

³¹ Novalis, “Monologue,” 191.

the void as language's non-totalizable essence. The only possible "whole" of language is thus its own outside: what Blanchot calls the interval, the displacement, the detour of the void, "le détour où tout pouvoir de donner sens cherche son origine dans l'écart qui l'en écarte" (*Entretien* 254/170). As detour, language, as well as the work of literature that would reveal it, can paradoxically only ever be obscured by the instance of its own inscription. Conversely, its visibility is like a white light in which all distinction disappears, language become "la pure conscience sans contenu, la pure parole qui ne peut rien dire" (523/356).

In Chapter 1, we have seen how romanticism arose in response to a philosophical demand for the presentation of the absolute. What Blanchot makes clear is the strange dispossession of the literary work at the very moment it would lay claim to the absolute:

cette prise de conscience d'elle-même qui la rend manifeste et la réduit à n'être rien de plus que sa manifestation, conduit la littérature à revendiquer non seulement le ciel, la terre, le passé, l'avenir, la physique, la philosophie—ce serait peu—, mais tout, le *tout*, qui agit dans chaque instant, dans chaque phénomène (Novalis): oui, tout ... non pas chaque instant tel qu'il arrive, ni chaque phénomène tel qu'il se produit, seulement le tout qui agit mystérieusement et invisiblement en tout (*Entretien* 521-22/355).

"Seulement le tout": literature gains the whole, but "only" the whole: the whole of speech that can say nothing, the whole of consciousness that, as form of the whole, becomes *mere* form of the whole. By the same triumphant gesture that literature would lay claim to the world in the form of a "literary absolute" (as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy name it) it loses the world, the particulars of *this* world, and this because its claim is premised on the void of its origin: "il a son origine, non dans un autre monde,

mais dans l'autre de tout monde" (*Espace* 86/75).

Thus Blanchot can conclude that romantic poetry witnesses "cette ère étrange de sa propre tautologie": a self-eclipse in which literature became "maître du tout, mais à condition que le tout ne contienne rien" (*Entretien* 523/356).

IV. Concern for the Origin

The self-eclipse of the literary work finds no better parable than Blanchot's reading of Orpheus in Hades—nor, perhaps, does Blanchot's own treatment of literature. Indeed, Blanchot identifies his short essay "Le regard d'Orphée" as the central point of *L'espace littéraire* (*Espace* i), a book that is itself at the center of Blanchot's career as well as his theorization of literature.

Orpheus dares to cross the Styx under the protection of a song, pursuing Eurydice who becomes "l'extrême que l'art puisse atteindre ... le point profondément obscur vers lequel l'art, le désir, la mort, la nuit semblent tendre" (227/171). At the same time, Orpheus' task, what constitutes his *work*, is not to attain his goal in darkness but to bring it—her—into the light of day, "de lui donner, dans le jour, forme, figure et réalité" (ibid). Orpheus thus finds himself in the grips of contradictory demands: the demand to grasp Eurydice in the obscurity of the night where she essentially appears, and the necessity of turning away from her as his only means of approach—that is, the necessity of approaching his goal by detour.

In this allegory of the artist and the inspiration that drives him—to impatience, imprudence, and transgression—Blanchot uncovers the structure of the artwork as "mouvement infiniment problématique" (229/172). The desire to behold Eurydice, not in daylight but, as Blanchot insists, "dans son obscurité nocturne, dans son éloignement," the desire not to have her live, "mais avoir vivante en elle la plénitude de sa mort" (228/172), is at once the impetus behind Orpheus's song and its point of

extreme uncertainty, the work's inexorable demand [l'exigence profonde de l'oeuvre] and that on behalf of which the work is sacrificed the instant Orpheus turns to look back. This desire, at once the origin of the work and its breaking point, is what Blanchot calls inspiration:

[T]out se passe comme si, en désobéissant à la loi, en regardant Eurydice, Orphée n'avait fait qu'obéir à l'exigence profonde de l'oeuvre ... Regarder Eurydice, sans souci du chant, dans l'impatience et l'imprudence du désir qui oublie la loi, c'est cela même, l'inspiration. (230-31/173)

Inspiration demands the sacrifice of the artist no less than the sacrifice of his work: it is that imperative to cross the "measureless deep," condition of the artistic process, and to devote oneself to a project without guarantee. Better, it demands fidelity to a project that, by definition, is the very absence and destruction of all guarantee, insofar as its originality and inventiveness consists in the invention of a new law, one that is both unforeseeable and inaugural of the conditions of its own reception.

The work emerges at a distance not only from any foreseeable program, but from the passion that inspires it, from the world that phenomenalizes it, and from the author that executes it. In the work's distance we find the solitude of the writer, for not only does the activity of writing require his renouncement of the world (for example, the world of purposeful activities) in the prosaic sense (Blanchot often refers to the Kafka's unhappiness in this regard), but in an essential sense, in which the writer is bound to the work in his function as writer and yet removed from the work insofar as the work's essence is to exist publicly and independently of his person, his intentions, and his ability to say "I" (17/26). Hence the paradox of writing "I am alone" (*Faux pas* 10/2)—a phrase that either ceases to refer to *my* solitude uniquely, or destroys it in making it communicable. Against the flux of the artistic process, the

work emerges the moment when:

... ce qui se glorifie en l'oeuvre, c'est l'oeuvre, où celle-ci cesse en quelque sorte d'avoir été faite, de se rapporter à quelqu'un qui l'ait faite, mais rassemble toute l'essence de l'oeuvre en ceci que maintenant il y a oeuvre, commencement et décision initiale, ce moment qui annule l'auteur ... (*Espace* 268-69/200)

The structure of the work, in sum, is one of sacrifice: this is its problematic and paradoxical character. In its independence, the work is pitted against everything that gives rise to it. And it must be (according to Blanchot's line of reasoning), for if it were identical to its conditions it would have no need to come into being.

The writer sacrifices himself for the sake of his work, but on condition that even the work can be risked for the sake of what inspires it. Inspiration both goads Orpheus to action and threatens his ruin, and it compromises the work no less, transforming the work into the search for its own origins—into the search for an expression of the inexpressible cause of the work's realization. The moment Orpheus turns to look at Eurydice shrouded in night, the work attains its inexpressible core and “se perde absolument” (232/174). But inasmuch as the imperative to behold Eurydice is the inspiration and the essence of Orpheus' song, the work can be said to take exception to itself in this moment and return to its source in the form of a forbidden, circular movement: “[C]'est ... seulement dans ce regard qu'elle [l'oeuvre] peut se dépasser, s'unir à son origine et se consacrer dans l'impossibilité” (ibid.). The work is consecrated the moment it is abandoned for the sake of its *raison d'être*, sacrificed in “cette soudaine éclipse... le retour nostalgique à l'incertitude de l'origine” (ibid.).

Finally, the instant of Orpheus's gaze reveals the paradoxical temporal structure of the work: a circular time that describes the “space” of literature. Just as the writer is both the author of his work and its product or function, the “origin” of the

work is both the work's source and its effect, its hidden central point—a kind of sinkhole: “Le point central de l'oeuvre ... [est] ce dont on ne peut s'approcher que par la réalisation de l'oeuvre, mais dont seule aussi l'approche fait l'oeuvre” (56/54). Thus Eurydice in Hades is at once the inspirational force behind Orpheus' song, the furthest point his art can reach, and the vortex of its destruction. Here again we come full circle (or perhaps we have gone nowhere), for Orpheus' gaze is both the death and the birth of his art: “Écrire commence avec le regard d'Orphée ... l'on n'écrit que si l'on atteint cet instant vers lequel l'on ne peut toutefois se porter que dans l'espace ouvert par le mouvement d'écrire. Pour écrire, il faut déjà écrire” (234/176). According, the only way to enter literature's space is by means of a “leap” (234/176).

V. Betrayal of the Origin

With the New Critics, we have seen how the unity of poetic form is identified with the unity of intention, and the integrity of the work with the necessity of the poetic imagination, working in opposition to contingent association. In Blanchot's treatment, we encounter a strikingly homologous situation, where the work is alternately identified with its origin (“le point central de l'oeuvre est l'oeuvre comme origine” [56/54]), and pitted against it in a gesture of sacrifice and betrayal. Both gestures are made in the name of an exigency.

How is the work specifically determined as “travestissement de l'origine”? Such is the assertion of Derrida's early essay “Force et signification” (1963), a piece that showcases Derrida's proximity to both Heidegger and Blanchot in his thinking of the literary work, especially in regard to the essay's central concern of the relation of a structure to its genesis. We will continue to make use of Derrida's essay to elucidate Blanchot's conception of the negative power of the literary work, a power that only can only appear under the sign of sacrifice.

First, let us consider that there are two senses of the concept of “origin” for Blanchot, just as there are two versions of the imaginary. And just as the image has one foot in the void while the other “grazes” the object, so, too, does the origin have two sides or faces, one turned toward the void as its condition of possibility, and one turned toward the work as its proper limit. On the one hand, the work *is its own* origin in the sense that the work simultaneously inaugurates and instantiates a new law, one that governs its production and the conditions of its reception, and is manifested in the form of a poetics. In this way, the origin of a work is identified with what is most essential in the work, in Heidegger’s sense of the origin of a thing being “the source of its essence” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 143).

At the same time, the work *is no longer* its origin, for if it were, it would be nothing more than “un problème indépassable, rien de plus que l’impossibilité de l’écrire” (*La part du feu* 297/305). Rather, it is the limit where the origin ceases. Or we might say that the work’s origin lies in its departure from the origin, just as the origin of writing lies in a displacement of the void. In this sense, the beginning of the work is found in the distance that is the work’s true condition. We recall that Blanchot criticizes the view of the imaginary in which the image follows from the presence of an object, arguing instead that the image reveals a distance proper to the object itself, “quelque chose qu’il avait maîtrisé pour être objet, contre quoi il s’était édifié et défini” (*Espace* 347/256).” The same must be true for the literary work, which originates, as we have seen, not in another world, “mais dans l’autre de tout monde” (*Espace* 86/75). Compare Derrida’s statement in “Force et signification”: “il s’agit ici d’une sortie hors du monde, vers un lieu qui n’est ni un non-lieu ni un autre monde, ni une utopie ni un alibi (*L’écriture et la différence* 17/8).

For Derrida as well as Blanchot, this exit from the world is none other than the opening of a negative space of freedom and possibility. Derrida describes poetic

freedom as possessing a hidden interior that serves as the work's "blind origin": "ce rien essentiel à partir duquel tout peut apparaître et se produire dans le langage, et dont la voix de M. Blanchot nous rappelle ... qu'il est la possibilité même de l'écriture et d'une inspiration littéraire en général" (ibid.). "Everything" is possible in literature, in other words, but only on the basis of a negation of the world, on the world's being held at a distance *as* negated. We know that Derrida remains close to this position throughout his career, testifying, for example, in an interview with Derek Attridge and later in *Passions*, on the essential relation of the "space of literature" to an authorization or principle of "being able to say everything" ["tout dire"] (*Acts* 36-40). The translators of the interview point out that "tout dire" means "both to 'say everything' with the sense of exhausting a totality, and to 'say anything,' i.e., to speak without constraints" (36). I would point out that the ambiguity of the "tout dire" can be referred to a duality in the concept of freedom in Kant's philosophy, which alternates between the positive freedom *of* self-legislation and the negative freedom *from* external constraint. Thus Derrida can write that the "law" of literature also tends to "defy or lift the law" (ibid.). Most importantly, Derrida observes that a "motif of totality" circulates around the question of literature (ibid.). The literary exhibits a tendency to formalize and totalize at the same time as it involves a kind of essential fragmentation or excess: that is why it is "création d'un 'univers qui s'ajoute à l'univers' ... qui ne dit donc que l'excès sur le tout" *Écriture* 17/8).

A work of literature does not in itself say "everything," of course, but the promise or principle of the imaginary space that it opens (and this concept of literature's space is explicitly taken up by Derrida) is one of the *possibility* of saying "anything." In other words, the space of literature is the field of the possible—and, as I would argue, it is the entirety of the field of the possible, a totalization of the possible that is utterly without content, as its only determination is that of a negation of the

whole of the actual.

We know that Blanchot and Derrida do not describe the space of literature as totalizing, but rather the opposite: literature, or literary language, or simply “writing,” is supposed to upset or be in excess of totalities such as the Work, the Book, the Self, the World. Yet both thinkers rely on a concept of freedom that is construed negatively as a freedom from constraint, and is predicated upon a prior totalization. “World,” for example, as it has come up in our discussion, is a precise term that refers to the totality of the actual, the whole of what exists in space and time as possible objects of human experience, so that when Derrida writes of an exit from the world and the “création d’un univers qui s’ajoute à l’univers ... qui ne dit donc que l’excès sur le tout,” he refers, not to the fictional universe of a novel or epic poem, but to the negative space of imagination construed as freedom from the world, with no determination except that of an excess over the whole. And when Derrida comments, in the interview cited above, that literature is “the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world” (47), his apparently conversational remark has all of the precision of a mathematical formula: literature is the *most* interesting thing in the world because it is only possible on the basis of a totalization of the whole, and *more* interesting than the world because its real origin lies in its negation of and distance from this whole.³²

Consider Blanchot’s remark in *La part du feu*, which emphasizes the essential relation between writing, freedom and totality: “A quoi tend l’écriture? A nous libérer de ce qui est. Et ce qui est, c’est tout ... tout ce qui pour nous marque le domaine du monde objectif” (*Part du feu* 46/39). Facing the whole of the objective world, we hold it at a distance; in this, Blanchot thinks, our freedom consists. “Cette libération,” he

³² Moreover, when Derrida refers to literature as “interesting,” he might be alluding to its ethical dimension, specifically to the solicitation of our interest and concern that comes from what is completely other.

continues, “s’accomplit grâce à l’étrange possibilité que nous avons de créer du vide autour de nous, de mettre une distance entre nous et les choses” (*Part du feu* 39).

Everywhere Blanchot celebrates the power of the void, and the power of literature to reveal the void as its proper condition, as well as the condition of human imagination. Blanchot draws on Jean Paul Sartre’s account of the negativity of the imagination,³³ as well as Kant’s notion of the free play of the faculties in a judgment of the beautiful—the freedom of the imagination to schematize without concepts (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* §35). Blanchot describes the imagination as the “play” that makes fiction possible, again articulating a relation between imagination, negation, and totality: “L’acte même d’imaginer, comme l’a bien montré Sartre, suppose qu’on s’élève au-dessus des objets réels particuliers et qu’on s’oriente vers la réalité prise dans son ensemble... pour l’écarter et dans cet écart, trouver le jeu sans lequel il n’y aurait ni image, ni imagination, ni fiction (*Part du feu* 84).³⁴ Similarly, in “Force et signification,” Derrida cites Kant’s treatment of the imagination as generating “inexponible representations ... in its free play” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* §57); as well as “a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* §49). Between this first and “second” nature we can locate Blanchot’s “écart”: the interval, or negation of and distance from the whole of nature that constitutes the essence of human freedom, the freedom on which this conception of the imagination is predicated.

To summarize the above, Blanchot’s reasoning seems to be the following, which I will break down somewhat artlessly into five assertions in order that we may inspect it more closely: 1) That the absence of an object is the necessary condition of

³³ See Sartre’s *L’imaginaire: psychologie-phenomenologique de l’imagination* (1940).

³⁴ This paragraph appears to have been excised from the English translation.

its representation (in language or otherwise); 2) that literary language has the capacity to point beyond the merely absent object to the general fact of disappearance as such, which in turn reveals that 3) absence or “the void” in general is the condition of “the whole of language” or the whole of the imaginary. Derrida reiterates this logic which travels from determinate negation, or the absence of a thing, to a generalized negativity, or absence as such, attesting that only the latter constitutes the specificity of literature: “Seule l’absence pure—non pas l’absence de ceci ou de cela—mais l’absence de tout où s’annonce toute présence—peut inspirer ... puis faire travailler ... Cette vacance comme situation de la littérature, c’est ce que la critique doit reconnaître comme la spécificité de son objet” (*Écriture* 17). 4) That the essence of a thing can be identified with its condition of possibility. Blanchot’s thought is difficult to pin down because it moves with lightning speed from a thing to the condition of that thing, and equates the two as if equating the thing with its truth. In this way Blanchot can proceed as if the essence of language were silence, or the essence of the image were the corpse. 5) All of the above holds true for the literary work, whose essence is identified with the negation of the world as the condition of its freedom.

In this way, it seems that Blanchot would condemn the literary work to an experience of perpetual self-erasure. If what is essentially true of literature is its freedom—and, moreover, if this freedom is construed in purely negative terms as freedom from constraint—then any actually existing literary work will remain the merely negative image of its own freedom, subtracting itself from the sublime and absolutized field of its possibility like a fall from grace. The consequences of Blanchot’s reasoning seem to be that the moment of art’s phenomenal existence is that of the erasure of its own truth, and the occlusion of its own origin, which in turn can only ever exist as withdrawal from phenomenality. Hence Blanchot’s reliance on liminal concepts like betrayal or sacrifice, by means of which traces of freedom can be

retained in the work, if only in the form of a loss.

There is something exceedingly thoughtful in Blanchot's work, something unsurpassably attentive to the precariousness of literary language and the specificity of its experience; and yet, at the same time, there is something resentful in the picture he paints, something that seems to despair in the fact that a thing like literature exists at all. At best, Blanchot bears the burden of this despair with heroic impassivity. I do not mean to deny that Blanchot's work is also celebratory, but what it celebrates is literature's capacity to reveal the void, its Orpheus-like attempt to bring this nothingness "form, figure, and reality"—even if, by determining the void, it is bound to lose its grip on it, and by manifesting it, it really only manifests an allegory of its own botched attempts at manifestation. It is telling that Blanchot's readings of individual literary works—those of Beckett, Kafka, and Mallarmé, for example—so often seem to be saying the same thing, and to be saying it endlessly. At bottom, for Blanchot, each work nothing but the site of a greater truth in which literature is overcome—or better, in which literature is revealed as the force of its own self-overcoming, the privileged producer of sad allegories of its own phenomenal and linguistic predicament.

CHAPTER THREE

INDIVIDUATION AND LITERARY FORM

“The abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained; and the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced (creativity)”

—Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*, vii

I have argued in Chapter One that our concern is not solely with romanticism as a will to system, or as the organic unity of mind and nature, form and matter. Nor is it romanticism understood as the will to fragment, to paradox, or to self-critique. Rather, what interests us here, and what would perhaps be much more accurately captured by the term “romanticism,” is the tension constitutive of these apparently polar interpretations. Specifically, I have argued that this tension structuring romanticism stems from the need to address a perceived conflict in Kant’s philosophical system between the necessity of the natural world and the freedom of the moral subject. The enterprise of literature, as it was re-imagined in German romanticism, was charged with the task of addressing this philosophical problem, while the literary work became the site and manifestation, not of the problem’s solution, but of its continual and unresolved re-inscription.

Attempting to reconcile necessity and freedom, form and formation, the romantic work was to become the new locus of the self-reflective absolute. Yet the very logic that would bestow autonomy to literature and grant it privileged access to the absolute, I would like to argue, guaranteed precisely the perpetual failure of this very project. For the romantics, literature attained the status of the absolute when, in its formal autonomy, it became the site of its own self-surpassing. Yet this could amount to nothing less than literature’s rediscovery of its position as a fragment, or as an exemplary moment within this absolute, and consequently of its true fulfillment in self-annihilation. In other words, the absolutization of literature led directly to the

absolutization of literature's status *as fragment*. Perhaps no better example of this logic can be found than Hegel's treatment of the aesthetic, where the artwork (of which poetry serves as the highest example)³⁵ takes on an explicitly mediating function, negotiating between the immediacy of the sensible world and the infinite, intelligible domain of spirit. For Hegel, famously, "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past" (*Lectures on Fine Art* 11).³⁶ That is, art must be overcome by its own position within the self-unfolding of the absolute.

I have shown that our received notion of the literary work is born from a clearly identifiable philosophical problem (the conflict of freedom and necessity), one representative of a dominant line in the history of philosophy (namely, German Idealism). Even more than this, I have tried to demonstrate that the very terms in which we pose the questions "What is literature?" or "What is a literary work?" have been determined—indeed, overdetermined—by these conceptual resources. When Gilles Deleuze writes that a problem "a toujours la solution qu'il mérite suivant la manière dont il est posé" (*Différence et répétition* 206/159), his point is not that problems are reflections of pre-given solutions, but that the way a problem is constructed and articulated determines in advance the parameters, or sense, of its possible solutions. In this way, Deleuze follows Henri Bergson in arguing that the task of philosophy is to work on problems (*Le bergsonisme* 4-5), and not merely on solutions or concepts, which are epiphenomenal and may obscure their problematical origins. Such is the case with the concept of the literary work: in confronting the

³⁵ "Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings. Yet, precisely, at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought" (Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art* 89).

³⁶ See Blanchot's "L'avenir et la question de l'art" in *L'espace littéraire*.

concept, we likewise confront a history that has dictated the terms in which its question can be posed, and which has limited in advance the sense of its possible answers.

In this chapter, I would like to propose a critique and re-articulation of the problem. My critique will continue with the seemingly disparate positions I outlined in Chapter Two—namely, that of the organic metaphor controlling the New Critics’ conception of the literary work, and that of the negativity that defines Blanchot’s—in the hopes of further exposing the common conceptual scaffolding that supports them both. Following this commentary, I will outline a different set of conceptual resources, drawn from an alternative philosophical tradition—namely, a tradition traced by Gilles Deleuze’s archeological and synthetic vision—and argue for its usefulness in injecting new life into the problem of the literary work.

I. Form and Intention Revisited

In the case of Cleanth Brooks’s “The Language of Paradox,” which I read as a paradigmatic example of much of New Critical thinking, we witnessed how Brooks drew heavily on Samuel Coleridge’s treatment of the imagination; and that Brooks ultimately sought a principle of poetic form in poetic intention. For Brooks, poetry draws on paradoxical situations and offers a multiplicity of metaphors, but what guarantees the unity of a poem and the sense of its juxtapositions is ultimately the aim of the poet. This may appear to run counter to the New Critics’ well-known exclusion of intention from the standards of literary criticism, but in fact, their “exclusion” only succeeded in relocating intention to the confines of the text itself. As we followed a logic famously articulated by Coleridge, we saw that the unity of form in the New Critical poem was predicated on the unifying power of intention, while this intention, in turn, was made wholly immanent to—indeed, indistinguishable from—the finished

poem. In other words, intention was supposed to account for the form of the work at the same time as the form of the work was treated as the only possible account of intention.

Moreover, we have seen that this equation of form and intention is not at odds with an organic view of the work as one might assume, but is rather entirely consistent with it, for the metaphor of the organic is what renders intelligible the conflation of process and product, intention and form. And it does so under the sign of necessity, since the notion of organic development invokes a necessary and teleological process, one whose end point is indistinguishable from the integrity of the process itself, which culminates in the being-for-itself of the organism.

The problem with this line of reasoning is, on the one hand, its inability to ground itself properly. What is presented as a genetic or explanatory principle of the literary work—intention—is made to depend on what it is supposed to explain—form. But what is more, the resemblance between this supposedly explanatory principle and its object seems to leave the crucial question unanswered—the question “what is a literary work?”—for in itself, it offers us no means of distinguishing a work from its genetic element or elements. In other words, how can the passage from intention to form to be understood? This question of distinguishing an entity from the forces that give rise to it is, philosophically speaking, a question of determination; and it should draw our attention to the fact that, when our supposedly explanatory principle resembles its object in this way, something else may remain entirely unthought underneath such a redundancy: here, the passage between those elements of form and intention, or form and the genesis of form, that are unique and irreducible to one another. What is the relationship between *those* subterranean elements?

Furthermore, I have argued that one of the most persistent effects of the organic analogy is the way that intention, our supposedly explanatory principle, is

invested with precisely that feature of form that it was called upon to account for: namely, its unity and integrity. That is, in the identification of form and intention in a metaphor of the organic, we likewise witness an exchange of qualities, so that intention is lent that very feature of form that was originally and primarily in question. In short, the consequence of the organic analogy is the unification of intention itself. But why should we presume that intention is a unified and coherent force? And what is at stake in such a presumption?

What is lacking in this New Critical logic is a positive, genetic account of the *difference* between form and intention, or form and its causal context. When, in “The Intentional Fallacy,” Wimsatt and Beardsely write that “there is a gross body of life... which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem,” and that, “for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context” (12), they are well aware of this difference between the cause of a poem and the poem itself, but they assign it a purely negative status. Intention, moreover, takes on an excising function, “cutting off” or “melting away” context from the resulting work. But according to what principle? The principle must be sought in the work itself, which can only spring into being fully formed, the spontaneous source of its own sufficient reason. The authors distinguish between what they call internal and external evidence for the meaning of a poem, a distinction that seems to be based on their prior assertion of an internality and an externality of poems themselves, and of the contingent and superfluous nature of what is external: “Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant,” they write. “[W]hat is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and ‘bugs’ from machinery” (4). But this statement is only meaningful after the fact of the poem: what is irrelevant will have been excluded, because whatever is excluded will have been irrelevant to the poem (that is, assuming we already know what a poem is, and know how to spot one among a morass of other

distractions). But what accounts for the exclusion of the irrelevant, and for the initial determination of inside and outside, intrinsic and extrinsic? In other words, what accounts for the determination of a poem against this background of supposedly superfluous noise? If we cannot answer this question, we do not yet know what a work of literature is.

By locating the sufficient reason of a poem in the poem itself, New Criticism can, and does, offer bountiful descriptions of poems that already exist; but it cannot account for the existence of a poem as such. Worse, by making the supposedly decisive feature of a poem—its unity and integrity—dependent on the unity of an animating intention, on the integrity of a “poetic imagination,” as Brooks does, for example, this treatment of literature conceals its own lack of explanatory power. In place of an explanation it offers a circular logic supported by a metaphor, the metaphor of organic necessity, and redundant of the very question it purports to answer: whence the unity of a poem?

Again, what is lacking is a positive account of the genesis of the difference between inside and outside, intrinsic and extrinsic, contingent and necessary. But the metaphysical assumptions of New Criticism—indeed, of nearly any critical approach, I would argue, invested in the autonomy and organic unity of its object—cannot allow this account to be written. These assumptions have already foreclosed certain crucial philosophical questions that ought to remain open to the debate at hand, such as: What is determination? What is the nature of causation? and What is an entity?

One place we can find the resources for a critical re-examination of these questions is in Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy, in both its profoundly polemical thrust, and its positive arguments for a univocal ontology and an affirmative conception of difference. While Deleuze is a prolific literary commentator, with important works on Proust, Kafka, and Sacher-Masoch, and essays on Beckett, Melville, D.H. Lawrence,

Lewis Carroll, and Pierre Klosowski, it is not to these writings that I would like to turn, but rather to the ontological investigations in Deleuze's philosophical works, especially those comprising the two halves of his 1968 thèse d'état, *Différence et répétition* and *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*. In his readings of literature, Deleuze tends to draw out those elements that are most useful in illustrating his philosophical concepts. Sensitive and original, his readings nevertheless often leave unaddressed the problematic status of literary discourse, the multiplicity and disparity of the competing claims that constitute the fabric of literary language. My own interest lies in considering the possibility of a Deleuzian ontology of the literary object, which would have different implications for a treatment of literary language, as well as for an understanding of the integrity of a literary work, than can be glimpsed from Deleuze's own reading practices.

The present project began with the observation that the question "What is literature?" risks concealing a certain prior understanding of being, of what it means to define the essence of something, and of what we mean when we say that something "is." I propose that we return to the terrain of these foundational ontological assumptions in order to investigate what it is that they contribute to our aesthetics, and how they might be altered. That is, what is at issue here is precisely and very crucially the nature of being of the literary object.

II. Being, Difference, and Individuation

In *Différence et répétition* (1968), in which he diverges from his readings in the history of philosophy to offer the first and most thorough presentation of his own philosophical system, Deleuze develops a distinctly alternative account of determination, which, drawing on Gilbert Simondon's remarkable philosophical treatise, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1964), he

refashions as a question of *individuation*.³⁷ Deleuze's debt to Simondon on this question has not received the critical attention it deserves, though it is a crucial one, as I hope to demonstrate. The traditional philosophical account views determination as a matter of predication, in which a predicate is represented as "fixe dans le concept, tout en devenant autre dans la chose" (*Différence et répétition* 21/12). For example, "animal devient autre en homme et en cheval, humanité autre en Pierre et Paul" (ibid.). In this way, determination typically signals a resemblance between a self-identical object and an equally self-identical or consistent concept, which is general enough that it can extend over an infinite range of similar objects ("animal" comprehends an infinite number of actual animals). If we were dealing with a particular literary work, then we would expect a resemblance between the work and the concept "literary," as well as a similarity between that work and others that would likewise be comprehended by the general concept or category "literary."

What is lost in the traditional account is, on the one hand, any apprehension of real singularity. The identity of a thing is determined in advance, so to speak, in accordance with the requirements of conceptual representation and its attendant need to determine, distribute and judge things according to pre-existing categories and hierarchies. That is, conceptual representation functions by setting up relations of resemblance (between a general concept and a particular object), opposition (between determinations within a concept), identity (between the concept and itself), and analogy (between concepts or intelligible categories) (44-45/29). The singular is disguised as a relation between the general and the particular, while any discrepancies or idiosyncrasies that intrude in this system of representation appear to be

³⁷ Simondon's Doctoral thesis, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, was originally published by Presses Universitaires de France in partial form in two separate works: *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1964) and *L'individuation psychique et collective* (1989).

epiphenomenal, mediate, and negative. They are treated as problems to be resolved (“la différence est le seul problème,” Deleuze writes of Hegel’s system [64/44]). This is what Deleuze describes as the subordination of difference to the requirements of representation, the “long error” of the philosophical tradition (385/301).

The mistake of what Deleuze calls “philosophies of difference,” identifying a lineage that passes “from Aristotle to Hegel via Leibniz,” lies in these philosophies’ attempt to think difference by inscribing it within the bounds of the concept (41/27). Difference does not yet have a concept of its own—that is, difference is not really *thought*—but is assigned a merely mediate and negative role in concept formation, where it is not overlooked so much as subordinated to representation and its attendant logic of sameness. In Aristotle, for example, difference appears as a difference between species that are subsumed by a common genus, or as a difference between genera, which are related to one another analogically on the basis of their internal relation to Being (49-50/33-34). The problem with Aristotle’s conception of Being, Deleuze argues, is that it is not universal enough to encompass Being as well as the constitution of individuality as such. Deleuze writes:

[Cette conception] doit essentiellement rapporter l’être à des existants particuliers, mais elle ne peut dire ce qui constitue leur individualité. Car ne retenant dans le particulier que ce qui est conforme au général (forme et matière), elle cherche le principe d’individuation dans tel ou tel élément des individus tout constitués (56/38).

Aristotle seeks a principle of individuation too late, as it were, on the basis of already-existing individuals.³⁸ In parallel fashion, New Criticism and its continuing legacy seek an explanatory principle of literature on the basis of already-constituted literary works.

³⁸ C.f. Wasser 60-61.

Deleuze's argument in *Différence et répétition*, that we do not yet have an affirmative conception of difference, directs his attention to the priority of individuation over determination. Individuation does not merely provide an alternative account of determination; rather, it reverses the hierarchy under which determination is normally thought, a hierarchy that privileges the determined over its essential and sustained relation with the undetermined (44/29). That is, individuation proposes to think the priority and continuity of a process that precedes determination and renders it possible. As Deleuze writes, "L'individuation précède en droit la forme et la matière, l'espèce et les parties, et tout autre élément de l'individu constituée... [elle] précède dans l'être les différences génériques, spécifiques et même individuelles" (57/38).

Individuation, in short, poses the question of the genesis of the individual. Even more than this, it signals the possibility of conceptualizing *the genesis of singularity as such*. We will return to this idea shortly; for now, I would like to emphasize that what we can witness here is the profoundly genetic character of Deleuze's thought. Despite his notoriety as a thinker of schizophrenia, "chaos," and "lines of flight" (terms from his later works co-authored with Guattari)³⁹ Deleuze's thesis of the primacy of difference stems from a very classical commitment to the principle of sufficient reason—albeit sufficient reason with a "twist" ("le fondement est courbé," Deleuze writes) (200/154). The philosophers Deleuze takes issue with have not simply overlooked the great diversity of the phenomenal world for the sake of concept-formation; they have failed to provide a sufficient account for it. That is, they have failed to account for the origin of diversity itself. "Tout diversité, tout changement renvoient à une différence qui en est la raison suffisante," Deleuze argues.

³⁹ I do not mean to suggest that these concepts derive solely from Guattari's influence, for they play a central role in Deleuze's project overall, albeit a project that evolves over time and shows a great relish for terminological proliferation.

Here we should note that Deleuze makes an important distinction: “La différence n’est pas le divers. Le divers est donné. Mais la différence, c’est ce par quoi le donné est donné” (286/222).

Impoverished accounts of individuation do just this: they privilege the given over “that by which the given is given,” and seek to account for the being of the individual on the basis of already-constituted individuals—even if (or perhaps especially if) they claim to do precisely the opposite. According to Gilbert Simondon, these accounts can be divided into two major camps: for one, being is a self-identical and self-sufficient substance, on whose surface individuals appear as precarious and contingent organizations (Simondon identifies this view with monism as well as atomism); for the other, being is conceived as a duality of form and matter, whose intersection produces individuals (hylomorphism) (Simondon 1-2). These apparently divergent approaches are alike in their treatment of the individual: both seek a causal principle that would exist prior to the operation of individuation, one that would explain, cause, and guide the process of the individual’s formation. But this common perspective, Simondon argues, hides a fundamental presupposition:

[P]our rendre compte de la genèse de l’individu avec ses caractères définitifs, il faut supposer l’existence d’un terme premier, le principe, qui porte en lui ce qui expliquera que l’individu soit individu et rendra compte de son éccéité. Mais il resterait précisément à montrer que l’ontogenèse peut avoir comme condition première un terme premier: un terme est déjà un individu ou tout au moins quelque chose d’individualisable. (2)

That is, terms, causes, and principles must themselves be individuated from the field to which they belong. In pretending to be able to pose the question of the genesis of individuality, then, both monism and hylomorphism in fact offer a circular logic that

proceeds from already-constituted individuals to explanatory principles that can only be thought on the basis of, and according to the image of, the individuals for which they are supposed to account. In the hylomorphic schema, for example, a principle of individuation is sought either in a form or in a matter which pre-exists the form-matter relation, and has already been isolated from other aspects of being (49). In Simondon's words: "[L]a notion de *principe d'individuation* sort dans une certaine mesure d'une genèse à rebours, d'une ontogénèse *renversée*... Dans cette notion même de principe, il y a un certain caractère qui préfigure l'individualité constituée, avec les propriétés qu'elle aura quand elle sera constituée" (ibid.).

To right this account, and to address the conceptual blockage that comes with according an ontological priority to the already-constituted individual, Simondon argues that we need to turn to the operation of individuation itself as anterior to notions of form, matter, or substance (27), and consider that this operation is capable of bearing its own principle within it. That is, individuation must be thought as a self-conditioning operation (288).

For Simondon as well as for Deleuze, the individual is not abandoned as a category or decried as illusory, but is seized as a relative reality, a phase of being or temporary solution that supposes a rich and tension-filled preindividual reality. Simondon describes this pre-individual reality as a "metastable state" defined by potentials and internal tensions rather than by equilibrium. Examples of metastable states in physics would be matter that has been supercooled or superheated (matter cooled or heated beyond the normal point of a phase change, yet without the phase change taking place), or supersaturated solutions (solutions that are made to contain more solute than they would under normal conditions). In a supersaturated solution, such as a pot of water that has been heated so that more sugar may be dissolved in it than can be dissolved at room temperature, a kind of equilibrium is attained, but it is a

precarious and local equilibrium, susceptible to change with the slightest interference (at room temperature, the addition of a single grain of sugar will cause all of the excess sugar to fall out of the solution). “Metastability,” in other words, describes a system with more energy than the system possesses in a stable state.

Applied to the concept of being, metastability describes a being that, Simondon writes, “n’est pas un, il est capable d’expansion à partir de lui-même; [il] ne subsiste pas par rapport à lui-même; il est contenu, tendu, superposé à lui-même ... [il] ne se réduit pas à ce qu’il est; il est accumulé en lui-même, potentialisé (284). Here the principle of non-contradiction does not apply, for metastable being “n’est jamais un... il est *plus qu’un*... il est plus riche que la cohérence avec soi” (ibid.). Furthermore, metastability does not indicate a lack of organization, but, to the contrary, an excess of incommensurable orders, a tension and disparity among heterogeneous scales of measure. Thus preindividuality can also be described as a “problematic field,” for which “l’individuation surgit comme l’acte de solution” (*Différence et répétition* 315/246).

In his reading of Simondon, Deleuze is especially attuned to this description of metastability as a state of disparity. “Ce qui définit essentiellement un système métastable,” he writes in an early review of Simondon’s work, “c’est l’existence d’une ‘disparation,’ au moins de deux ordres de grandeur, de deux échelles de réalité disparates” (*L’île déserte* 121). The “disparate,” for Deleuze, is another name for “difference in itself,” which Deleuze identifies as the sufficient reason of all phenomena. The disparate is “that by which the given is given.” “Tout phénomène renvoie à une inégalité qui le conditionne,” he writes. “La raison du sensible, la condition de ce qui apparaît, ce n’est pas l’espace et le temps, mais l’Inégal en soi, la disparation” (287/222-23).

Yet merely to assert the priority of the preindividual over the individual would

betray the truly radical nature of the argument at hand. Simondon risks betraying his own argument whenever he treats the preindividual as a superior reality or horizon, a “primitive all” to which increasingly collective operations of being are destined to return (Toscano 140-141).⁴⁰ Moreover, this tendency risks repeating the very philosophical gesture that both Simondon and Deleuze seek to criticize, namely, the gesture of trying to account for the individual by subordinating it to an even greater or more elemental individual (in this case, a transcendent and unified ground of preindividuality). This is the point at which Deleuze departs from Simondon, or perhaps takes Simondon’s thesis to its real conclusion, for he goes beyond the substitution of an energistic conception of being for a substantialist one, or even a notion of difference-in-itself for substance-in-itself, in order to think being as absolutely immanent to its (divergent) operations. In other words, for Deleuze the so-called ground is itself immanent to the operation that differentiates the ground from the grounded. It would seem that this is the only way Simondon’s notion of a “self-conditioning operation” can be affirmed absolutely. “Le fondement est courbé,” as Deleuze writes, because what is most “fundamental” is also what happens at the surface of being: the differential operation by which the individual distinguishes itself from the ground, while the ground does not distinguish itself from it. “L’individu s’en distingue, mais lui, ne s’en distingue pas” (*Différence* 197/152).

We can see here that both an affirmative concept of difference and a thesis of absolute immanence are the necessary components of a fully realized ontology of individuation. Nevertheless, a limited conception of immanence is at work in Simondon’s philosophy when he seeks to understand the genesis of form from within

⁴⁰ Toscano identifies an ambivalence in Simondon’s philosophy on this point, writing that “it is in fact legitimate to portray Simondon’s philosophy as driven by a fundamentally conciliatory vision” (Toscano 140). Likewise, Pascal Chabot, whom Toscano cites, speaks of a “finalism” animating Simondon’s philosophy (Chabot 125).

a metastable system rather than from the imposition of an external model or a transcendent principle. In individuating itself, an individual does not divorce itself from its metastable state, but continues to transport certain preindividual potentials and tensions. As Deleuze writes, “l’individu se trouve donc accolé à une moitié pré-individuelle” (*DR* 317/246). The preindividual persists alongside the individual, “car l’individuation n’épuise pas d’un seul coup les potentiels de la réalité préindividuelle” (Simondon 4). Individuation is a problem-solving operation because it resolves certain tensions while preserving others in the form of a structure (Simondon 5). And in structuring itself, it structures communication between heterogeneous orders (8). Or in Deleuze’s terms, “L’acte d’individuation consiste, non pas à supprimer le problème, mais à intégrer les éléments de la disparation dans un état de couplage qui en assure la résonance interne” (*Différence* 317/246). Moreover, because it does not exhaust its preindividual state, individuation will be the source of future states of metastability, and it will contain micro-operations of individuation within itself, as well as participate in collective operations of individuation larger than itself. Finally, individuation always gives rise to relations to a milieu, forming an individual-environmental complex. “Ce que l’individuation fait apparaître n’est pas seulement l’individu mais le couple individu-milieu,” Simondon writes (4). Thus the system within which an individual constitutes itself cannot be said to be extrinsic to it any more than intrinsic; “il lui est associé, il est son milieu associé” (68).

But we need to state matters even more clearly than this, because an individual is not a separable entity that exists or can be conceived prior to or outside its relation to its milieu. The individual *is* its relations, it invents its relations as it invents itself as a support for these relations; and thus to comprehend the emergence of the individual is to comprehend “the genesis or constitution of relation itself” (Toscano 138). “Ce qui est vraiment et essentiellement l’individu,” Simondon asserts, “est la relation

active, l'échange entre l'extrinsèque et l'intrinsèque. ... L'intrinsèque, l'intériorité de l'individu n'existerait pas sans l'opération relationnelle permanente qui est individuation permanente" (68). The individual is not a self-sufficient term participating in a form-matter relation that pre-exists it, but "le théâtre et l'agent d'une relation," actively constituting itself as it actively relates itself, and sheltering its relations with a relative degree of consistency and a residue of potential energy. In this way, an individual cannot even be said to abide within its own limits, but rather *to constitute itself at these limits* (ibid; italics mine).

III. Negativity and Literary Ontology

We have yet to explore the significance of an ontology of individuation for a theory of the literary work, although I hope the relevance of the preceding is at least discernable. In what follows, I would like to highlight the importance of these concepts to the question of literature by, first, considering Maurice Blanchot's treatment of the negativity of literature in light of the immanence of individuation.

Previously, we have seen that for Blanchot, the structure of the work is one of sacrifice: a sacrifice of the inspiration that gave rise to it, of the flux of the artistic process, of the labor and even the person of the writer, so that the work's very determination is that of a distance from its origin. What is operative here is, in part, a concept of negative determination, so that the literary work appears at the moment of rupture, "où [l'oeuvre] cesse en quelque sorte d'avoir été faite, de se rapporter à quelqu'un qui l'ait faite" (*Espace* 268-69/200). But even more than this, the *real* origin of a work is said to lie not in the world but in its very distance from the world, a distance conceived as a negative space of freedom, and which in turn can only be concealed—or more accurately, revealed *as* concealed—as the work comes into existence.

At stake in this account is the question of how to relate an autonomous structure—the literary work—to its genesis, or how to relate the freedom of a work (for a work is “free” insofar as it inaugurates and instantiates its own law) to the necessity of the cause-effect relationship that produces it. By opposing the one to the other, Blanchot perpetuates the very entrenched romantic and idealist gesture of pitting necessity and freedom against one another, drawing heavily on the high drama of this conflict, and turning the literary work into a testament of its insolubility.

In Blanchot’s account, literary language has the capacity to reveal the fact that negativity is essential to it: in its freedom from the world and from transitive communication, it manifests itself, and in so doing points to the illusion of language’s immediacy, to the displacement of being at the origin of language, and to the dissimulation of this displacement as literature’s most intimate functioning. In the previous chapter we saw that Blanchot draws on the phenomenological tradition in distinguishing reality from appearance; and he takes this reasoning to a certain conclusion by positing, first, that the absence of an object in reality is the necessary condition of its representation, and, second, that a more radical absence or negativity is the condition of “the whole of language” or the whole of the imaginary. At work in this account, we might say, is a certain conception of literary creation. And negativity is thrust to the fore in this account because of a series of entrenched ontological suppositions about the nature of creation, namely: that determination can only be conceived negatively, and that creation in particular entails a radical break between the conditions of creation and the conditioned, or between creative process and creative product. Blanchot will raise this radical break to the level of an essential truth, taking negativity as such be the real condition of creation. The literary work thus appears to be infinitely paradoxical: it simultaneously depends on negativity for its being, seeks this negativity as it manifests itself as a self-reflexive question, and obscures this

negativity in the very fact that it exists at all and still manages to communicate something.

Blanchot assumes that the literary work, or any creative product, must be determined negatively because if it were continuous with its conditions, he reasons, it would not be new. In fact, it would not even be determinate. This line of thinking inspires a kind of “paradox of the new,” whereby the conditions of possibility of the new—that the new be unforeseeable, unprogrammable, and, at the limit, unrecognizable—appear simultaneously to be the conditions of its impossibility.⁴¹ Yet this paradox would collapse without the brace of negative determination, and without the assumption that thought must proceed by means of representation.

To use Deleuze’s terms, we would say that this paradox only appears when difference is mediated by the requirements of representation: when difference appears under the guise of opposition (in this case, the literary work would be everything that its conditions of creation are *not*), or as what must lie outside of conceptual thought altogether (so that the literary work would not even be opposed to its conditions, but to everything that can appear, originating “non dans un autre monde, mais dans l’autre de tout monde” [*Espace* 86/75]).

Beyond the assertion of an irresolvable paradox, and beyond the pathos that irresolvable paradoxes tend to incite—a paradox that may amount to no more than a superficial oscillation between two unexamined alternatives—what cannot be thought in this schema is how something can arise from a given set of conditions and at the same time differ from them. Yet I would suggest that not only is this negativity an imposter for real difference, but it can provide no real account of literary production. We have seen that in Blanchot’s thought, a work of literature is supposed to bear an

⁴¹ For a treatment of this paradox in Derrida’s work, see for example “Psyché: Inventions de l’autre,” in the collection by the same name.

essential relation to the void: in the parable of Orpheus in Hades, for example, Orpheus pursues Eurydice who becomes “l’extrême que l’art puisse atteindre ... le point profondément obscur vers lequel l’art, le désir, la mort, la nuit semblent tendre” (227/171). The approach of this obscure point is commanded by “l’exigence profonde de l’oeuvre.” But what is the nature of this exigency? We have seen that the possibility of literature is premised on the negation of the world, which opens up the space of freedom (freedom construed as freedom *from*) necessary to literary creation. To pursue the origin of the work is thus to approach the conditions of possibility of writing.

Yet condition is not causation. Conditions of possibility are not the cause of anything, and certainly not the cause of anything real. How, then, do we account for the work’s passage from its conditions to its realization? For its passage from the possible to the real? Despite Blanchot’s rhetorical insistence on the unrelenting obligation of the writer and the “deep demand” of the work, I would argue that there is no relation of necessity between the possible and the real, and certainly no necessary passage from the totality of the possible, construed in purely negative terms, to a determinate real whose only function would be to limit this possibility, or to retain a trace of it in the form of a loss.

In his reading of Henri Bergson, Deleuze underscores Bergson’s claim that the concept of possibility participates in one of the most notoriously badly-posed problems of metaphysics: Why is there something rather than nothing? (*Le bergsonisme* 6-11). The possible is supposed to precede the real; but this supposition is based on the domination of thought by representation, and representation’s need to spatialize and distribute judgments according to preexisting concepts and categories. Representation proceeds as if a given judgment were true for all time, and so, Bergson writes, “à toute affirmation vraie nous attribuons ainsi un effet rétroactif; ou plutôt

nous lui imprimons un mouvement rétrograde” (Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* 13). Thus of any new product in the universe, we cling to the conviction that “même s’il n’a pas été conçu avant de se produire, il aurait pu l’être, et qu’en ce sens il figure de toute éternité, à l’état de possible, dans quelque intelligence réelle ou virtuelle” (ibid.). But there is not “less” in the idea of the possible, and “more” in the idea of the real, so that the possibility of a thing precedes its existence the way a sketch precedes an oil painting, “car le possible,” Bergson argues, “n’est que le réel avec, en plus, un acte de l’esprit qui en rejette l’image dans le passé une fois qu’il s’est produit” (ibid. 62).

The only necessity that belongs to the possible is the latter’s dependence on the “retrograde movement” of thought that finds it, and makes it into an image of the real. The possible appears when an image of the real is projected backwards in time in the form of a future perfect, as what will have been possible, and it is supported by the illusion that things can be represented before they are created—“comme si,” Bergson exclaims, “la chose et l’idée de la chose, sa réalité et sa possibilité, n’étaient pas créées du même coup lorsqu’il s’agit d’une forme véritablement neuve, inventée par l’art ou la nature!” (*La pensée et le mouvant* 13). We can see that the very concept of possibility is antagonistic to a real apprehension of novelty, and that it labors under the same illusion as that of impoverished accounts of individuation: it privileges the given over “that by which the given is given,” pretending to account for the production of this given on the basis of an already-formed image.

It is true that Blanchot argues that the literary work bears an essential relation, not to a positive possibility that would prefigure it, but to a generalized absence that is the space of its freedom. Yet is the thought of this absence greater or less than the thought of a work? Deleuze emphasizes that for Bergson the idea of non-being is produced in the same manner as that of possibility: “Dans l’idée de non-être,” he writes, “il y a l’idée d’être, pus une opération logique de négation généralisée, plus le

motif psychologique particulier de cette opération” (*Bergsonisme* 6). Bergson finds the germ of his argument in Kant’s objection to the ontological argument for the existence of God, where Kant asserts that existence is not a predicate to be attributed to or subtracted from a concept, but that the concept of a thing is inseparable from the affirmation of its existence (Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* 565). Spinoza makes exactly the same argument, in fact, when he claims that volition is inseparable from concept formation (*Ethics* IIP49). If the affirmation of a thing is coextensive with its concept, then negation is not an equivalent and alternate act of the mind, but a second-order operation, an affirmation of the thing *plus the addition* of the thought of its substitution by another object, or by the whole of reality seized *en bloc*. Thus Bergson writes:

L’idée d’abolition ... se forme donc ici au cours de la substitution d’une chose à une autre, dès que cette substitution est pensée par un esprit qui préférerait maintenir l’ancienne chose à la place de la nouvelle. ... Elle implique du côté subjectif une préférence, du côté objectif une substitution, et n’est point autre chose qu’une combinaison, ou plutôt une interférence, entre ce sentiment de préférence et cette idée de substitution. (*Évolution créatrice* 167/282)

If it is true, as Bergson argues, that “[L]’idée de l’objet ‘n’existant pas’ est nécessairement l’idée de l’objet ‘existant,’ avec, en plus, la représentation d’une exclusion de cet objet” (ibid. 169), and if it is true that the exclusion of an object—its determinate negation—is itself only the truncated idea of the substitution of one particular object for another together with the direction of our vested interest towards only one of those objects, then does Blanchot’s conception of negativity indicate anything other than the subjective direction of his thought coupled with the limitation it encounters there? And is his concept of the whole of the void not synthetically

produced on the basis of a series of substitutions, so that “le néant n’est pas autre chose que la limite où tend l’opération”? (ibid. 166). That is, I would suggest that the negativity Blanchot discovers is not an essential dimension of the literary work, but a limitation in the very concept of possibility. Because Blanchot confronts the imperative to think creation in terms of difference, and because he cannot conceive of difference outside of negation and opposition, and, furthermore, because he likely recognizes the paradox implicit in the concept of the new—that is, the unthinkability of the new before it arrives, and thus the impossibility of its possibility—Blanchot comes face to face with the insufficiency of the possible in accounting for literary creation. He transforms the lacuna he encounters into a radical absence, raising it to the level of an absence of the whole and bestowing upon it the status of an essential truth, the inspiration and horizon of the literary work. Yet perhaps this lacuna is not the essential origin of the work, but the testament to a blind spot in this particular logic, a shadow that falls over Blanchot’s thought in the form of an inability to account for the productivity and continuity of difference itself.

The consequences of Bergson’s argument for the subjective dimension of negation—for the fact that negation involves the subjective direction of our interest—are not negligible, for they point to a powerful source of pathos in Blanchot’s work. “L’idée d’abolition n’est ... pas une pure idée,” Bergson writes; “elle implique qu’on regrette le passé ou qu’on le conçoit regrettable, qu’on a quelque raison de s’y attarder” (ibid. 173). If Blanchot’s interests lie with the negative as a space of possibility, this can only take the form of a regret, and appear at the expense of actual literary works. Deleuze points out the two rules of realization with respect to the possible: that of resemblance and that of limitation (*Bergsonisme* 99). In a conception of literature where the possibility of the work is not only without representation but wholly unrepresentable, the realized literary work will appear as pure limitation: this

will be the “true” meaning or horizon towards which it tends, and anything else it seems to signify along the way will, at best, be in the service of this horizon, and at worst, will appear unconscious and illusory.

IV. Individuation and Literary Form

The theory of individuation that Deleuze constructs from his readings of Simondon is a theory of immanent production, one with radical consequences for the concept of possibility. As a way of returning to our study of individuation and considering its implications for literary theory, I will organize the following argument according to five propositions for restructuring our concept of the literary object according to a Deleuze-inflected ontology of individuation. I will state them first as a group, and then examine each one in detail.

- 1. Replace the negative with the problematic.*
- 2. Replace a notion of the unity of intention or imagination with that of a cause that is complex, self-differing and immanent to its effects.*
- 3. Replace the concept of the literary Opus with that of literature as asymmetrical operation.*
- 4. Replace the concepts of the interiority, self-reflection, and closure of a work with that of a relative consistency that constitutes itself at its own limits.*
- 5. Replace the subject and object of literary analysis with the multiplicity of a literary assemblage.*

- 1. Replace the negative with the problematic.*

How do we understand the integrity of a literary work? This is the essential question. Is the very notion of a “work” only possible on the basis of the work’s

extraction from history, from psychology, and from everyday language use? Can the work's autonomy be thought only in terms of an absence of heteronomy—that is, in terms of the work's freedom from the legislation of these other domains? Or in Blanchot's terms, must a work come into being on the basis of its distance from and negation of the phenomenal world? Must it be purchased at the great price of a sacrifice of the conditions that gave rise to it?

Individuation describes the progressive emergence of an individual from a complex, pre-individual state without submitting this process to the narrow straightness of determinate negation, to the error of abstraction, or to the absurdity of a solution that would resemble in advance the very problem it purports to solve.⁴² As we have seen, an individual conceived in this way is not determined in opposition to other determinate entities, but is individuated from the forces and tendencies that give rise to it. It is essentially related, not to another determinate object, nor to negativity as such, but to a virtual field of determinable tendencies, and it maintains a precise and unilateral relation with this field (*DR* 44/29). The notion of an essential negativity as the sole repository for literary autonomy must be replaced by the notion of a *literary problematic field*.

The problematic is not the negative. Deleuze laments the dubious alternative that we have received from the history of philosophy with respect to non-being: either Being is determined as “full, positive reality” admitting of no non-being whatsoever, or else non-being is seized as the sign of the being of Negativity, and the ground of negation (*DR* 63/88). In lieu of this alternative, Deleuze seeks a third option: like Heidegger, he would recognize the ontological status of the question or the problem, yet without thereby identifying the question or problem with either Being or

⁴² On the error of reducing problems to the image of pre-given solutions, see Deleuze, *DR* 203-207/156-159.

Negativity. In this vein, Deleuze speaks of the “being of the problematic.” His aim is to construct a notion of being universal enough to account for Being and difference *as well as the difference between them*, a notion universal enough to encompass existing individuals *as well as* the differential, pre-individual, and problematic field from which they emerge.

A problem is a complex of tensions and tendencies that can only be related to one another differentially. It is inaccessible to experience, yet completely objective (*DR* 169). Deleuze describes it as “determinable” with respect to the individual that emerges from it, insofar as the individual selects and “dramatizes” certain elements of a problem, thereby rendering them perceptible or intelligible (*ibid.*). This notion of dramatization echoes Simondon’s description of the individual as both the agent and “theater” of the relations that constitute him. Finally, the problem is determinable *as a* problem because it acts as an imperative. It transmits a dynamism or tendency, which is why the problem can only be dramatized and not represented.

What this theory might contribute to literary studies is, first, the general and perhaps seemingly banal idea that a literary work emerges in response to a problem. Let us consider that this problem, or literary problematic field, is as utterly unique as the work of art it determines, yet of greater complexity than the work itself. It is completely real, yet indeterminate when considered independently of the work, which in turn selects and repeats certain problematic elements, resolving certain tensions, at once presenting itself as a solution and determining the contours of the problem to which it responds.

Because the problem is indeterminate when considered in itself, I am hesitant to proffer examples of it in the abstract. But I would at least suggest that the joints of articulation between the work and the problematic field would include those places where the work inserts itself into literary history (but *which* history?), into a social

field (but a field populated by *whom?*), into a set of institutional practices, into an array of material practices (but *which* practices?). It would likewise include those places where the work selects and draws on quantities of sensations, impersonal affects, thoughts, images, linguistic structures, and tropological systems—all of which are determined only by the role they play internal to the work. That is, all of these orders remain indeterminate in themselves and bound to the work for their precise articulation. Each can nevertheless be conceived apart from the work, and as constituted in itself by a series of differential relations, or by a series of intensive differences. For example, a linguistic order is constituted by the differential relations of ideal units, or “phonemes,” in addition to the manifestation of these relations in an actual language (*DR* 250/193). A sensation, to take another example, can be divided into intensive “degrees” which allow us to speak of its increase or decrease (I am in less pain today than I was yesterday)(*DR* 287-304/223-236). A problematic field is traversed by an excess of such heterogeneous and incommensurable orders, and is articulated internally (“differentiated”) by the resonances of these orders as well as by their regions of incommensurability. The work is the system of their communicative elements; it emerges from this field in an act of reciprocal determination, so that it is determined by the field—its problematic, pre-individual milieu—and at the same time furnishes this field with its precise articulation. In sum, we could say that the problematic field is simultaneously the work’s genetic element, and is immanent to its manifestation in the work.⁴³ Operative here is Deleuze’s complex and precise

⁴³ Here I would refer the reader to Deleuze’s notion of sense, most fully developed in *Logique du sens*, which is likewise defined as both the genetic element of a proposition and wholly immanent to the proposition to which it gives rise. We might say the same of linguistic phonemes, or of any ideal structure: a structure is originary insofar as it determines the possible permutations of a system, while at the same time it only exists because of its material manifestations. The two are reciprocally determining, but a structure is “genetic” insofar as it grounds, accounts for, or serves as the reason for, its actualization. By contrast, its actualization explicates and provides a foundation for it. For any given phenomenon, Deleuze tends to distinguish between its empirical “foundation” and its transcendental “ground.” See especially *DR* 108-110/79-81.

philosophy of immanence, which attempts to develop a transcendental field that is simultaneously immanent to its phenomena and articulable in distinction from them.⁴⁴

2. Replace a notion of the unity of intention or imagination with that of a cause that is complex, self-differing and immanent to its effects

A literary problematic field is both indeterminate when considered in isolation, and determinable with respect to the work that emerges as its “solution.” Deleuze also notes that problems are “determining”: in a reciprocal movement, a problem is not only determined by, but determines, the work. We thus confront an expanded notion of causation, one that includes a logical as well as material dimension, and attempts to think a cause that is immanent to its effects. In distinction from the notion of a cause that would seek to explain a literary work on the basis of the unity of a pre-given intention, such as we perceived in New Criticism, or on the basis of an inspiration understood purely negatively, such as we found in Blanchot, our approach would draw instead on the notion of a cause that is complex and differing in itself, one that transmits a difference.

Although Simondon envisages a state of disparate and metastable tensions that give rise to an immanent operation of individuation, we need to go deeper into the philosophical tradition for a more developed conception of immanent production. For Deleuze there is no greater thinker of immanence than Benedict de Spinoza, “prince des philosophes”: “Il a montré, dressé, pensé le plan d’immanence le ‘meilleur,’ c’est-à-dire le plus pur, celui qui ne se donne pas au transcendant ni ne redonne du

⁴⁴ This is one of the central concerns of *Spinoza et le problème d’expression*: how, and in what way, is immanence articulable? Given Spinoza’s construction of an absolute plane of immanence, made notorious by the formula “*Deus sive Natura*,” what forms of articulation of this plane are possible? I would argue that Deleuze turns to Spinoza’s concept of “expression” as the potential bearer of a logic and an articulation of immanence.

transcendant, celui qui inspire le moins d'illusions, de mauvais sentiments et de perceptions erronées" (*Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* 59/60). If we turn to Spinoza's conception of the productivity of the unique substance of nature, itself a kind of metastable being, we may find significant resources for advancing our notion of the problematic genesis of the literary work. In what follows, our specific interest will lie in the way Spinoza conceives of the productivity of substance, which for us will become the productivity of a literary problem, and a treatment of the literary work as a modality of this problem.

What Spinoza imparts to a philosophy of immanence may be most readily grasped in his polemical engagement with the theological tradition. For us, the import of his philosophy lies in the assertion that Being produces its modalities, or finite beings, in the same forms that comprise its essence, and by means of the same activity that constitutes its existence. Spinoza articulates both a univocity of form and a univocity of cause, which in theological terms entails a commonality between God and his creatures, and an identity between the conditions of God's existence and his action (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 90/102). This thesis directly challenges the tradition of conceiving of God's relation to his creatures by means of emanation or analogy (in this view, God "is" and his creatures "are," but not in the same sense; a hierarchy of being is preserved so as to avoid the dangers of pantheism). Significantly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, it is the assertion of a common form between God and his creatures that allows Spinoza to posit a difference in nature between them, that is, a difference in nature between cause and effect. Spinoza writes, "For what is caused differs from its cause precisely in what it has from the cause" (IP1Schol). We can understand this assertion, Spinoza explains, when we see that a given effect is not destroyed when its cause is destroyed. According to this ontology of immanence, in other words, what an effect gains from its cause is *precisely and only its difference* and

independence from that cause.

Because existence is equated with power in Spinoza's philosophy ("to be able to exist is to have power" [*Ethics* IP11Dem]), and because power is understood to mean the power to act and produce (*Ethics* IP34 and IVPref), substance, which exists absolutely and necessarily, is postulated to be absolutely and necessarily productive. Spinoza thus writes, "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes" (*Ethics* IP16). Furthermore, because substance is unique, it acts in accordance with its own nature, not in accordance with any end, nor with anything external to it that would provoke it or provide a model for its action. Spinoza rejects the notion of a final cause in no uncertain terms:

That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists. ... The reason, therefore, or cause, why God, or Nature, acts, and the reason why he exists, are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. (*Ethics* IV Pref)

In addition, because substance is the unique substance of the whole of nature, all modes or finite beings participate in its constitution, and express its causal power. The production of the modes in Spinoza's system is more like the transmission and transformation of a dynamism than determination in the classical sense, for what the modes receive from substance is the power to act or operate in accordance with their own nature, as well as the power to cause other things to operate. Spinoza writes: "All things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of the divine nature" (*Ethics* I P29). Later, "[W]hatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things" (I P36 Dem). Modes, in other words, specify the local transformations of the power of substance.

We can see that for Spinoza, unlike Kant or the Romantics, freedom is not

sought in opposition to the system of nature, but is conceived wholly within its bounds. What we might call an individual's freedom or natural right is no more than that individual's power to exist and to act in a given set of conditions, and according to the law of its own nature.⁴⁵ For Spinoza, "God alone is a free cause" (IP17Cor2), according to the definitions he gives of freedom and necessity: "That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner" (ID7). From another perspective, however, we might say that every being partakes in God's freedom, but to a greater or lesser extent. As we have seen, the causal production of the modes is an imparting of causal power, a power that is both constitutive of the singularity of finite beings and what serves to link those beings to an absolute of which they are only a modality. In short, it is a power made to the measure of each singular being. Put otherwise, insofar as God is nothing but the whole of nature, or the cohesion of all things understood in the necessity of their causal interconnection, each thing partakes in a degree of freedom from the very immanence of its cause.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See also the *Theological-Political Treatise*: "The right of the individual is coextensive with its determinate power" (237).

⁴⁶ The notion of a causal production of freedom has quite interesting echoes in contemporary chaos theory. "Chaos" has been defined by the Royal Society in London in 1986 as "stochastic behavior occurring in a deterministic system" (Stewart 12). It describes the ability of deterministic laws to produce unpredictable behavior, and can be found in a variety of dynamical systems, including weather systems, statistics of population growth or stock market prices, or even something as simple as a double pendulum (a pendulum with a second pendulum suspended from the end of the first). In all of these systems, long-term behavior is completely determined by initial conditions, and yet completely unpredictable and unrepeatable—not only in practice but in theory. It is unpredictable because great changes are highly sensitive to minute differences in initial conditions, including differences at the quantum level, where Heisenberg's uncertainty principle applies. Perhaps the image of a double pendulum can best illustrate our reading of Spinoza's notion of freedom: the upper pendulum transmits movement to the lower, but the lower moves in ways that can not be predicted. See Stewart, Gleick.

This degree of freedom is what Spinoza also calls the *conatus*,⁴⁷ or the endeavor of each thing to persevere in its being, where “persevere” does not mean the maintenance of a *status quo*, but the exercise of one’s power to act, and the tendency to seek out other things that increase one’s power. In fact, we might go so far as to argue that the concept of *conatus* constitutes Spinoza’s attempt to align the essence of a thing with its becoming. We might say that what occupies the place of the individual in this philosophy is a quantity of force or activity, a degree of dynamism that causes the individual to effect itself continually at its limits.⁴⁸ The idea of being as *conatus* is continuous with a notion of the absolute as a self-causing and self-affecting substance: like a perpetual-motion machine, substance “is” only by continually self-producing and self-affecting; that is, substance exists by producing itself as power in the modes.

From this unique conception of immanent causality, I would suggest several implications for rethinking the nature of the literary work. Spinoza’s philosophy reveals the possibility of conceiving of individuality as continuous with causal production, and of singularity as continuous with necessity. If our received idea of aesthetic autonomy has its origin in Kantian philosophy and Kant’s Romantic legacy, then we might do well to reexamine Spinoza’s work in order to mine it, not for an alternative aesthetics, but for an alternative conception of autonomy as such. Spinoza argues famously that man should not be conceived as a kind of “kingdom within a kingdom” (*Ethics* IIIPref.), because his power cannot be detached from that of nature and be conceived as analogous to it, but is rather wholly continuous with nature, and

⁴⁷ *Conatus* is the Latin noun form of “striving.”

⁴⁸ On the notion of “limit” as it is used here, consider these lines from *Différence et répétition*: “On dira que ‘jusqu’au bout’ définit encore une limite. Mais la limite, *πέρας*, ne désigne plus ici ce qui maintient la chose sous une loi, ne ce qui la termine ou la sépare, mais au contraire ce à partir de quoi elle se déploie et déploie toute sa puissance” (55/37).

subject to its laws. Spinoza's philosophy suggests the possibility that singularity and originality are causally determined, and in fact can *only* be thought on the basis of their causes. We might say the same for a work of literature, whose originality should not be sought on the basis of the work's total rupture from the problems that determine it, but rather must be grasped through its determining problematic, which in turn transmits to the work its freedom and its event-like structure.⁴⁹

3. Replace the concept of the literary Opus with that of literature as asymmetrical operation

In *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze envisions a treatment of difference that would raise it to the status of the absolute; in Spinoza's system, he argues, this could only happen if one were to "faire tourner la substance autour des modes" (*D&R* 388/304). By this phrase Deleuze suggests a turn of the screw of immanence: a cause that would exist solely in its effects and depend on them for its articulation, a pre-individual state that would be wholly dependent on the individuals to which it gives rise.

Even more, we saw earlier that for Deleuze, the full realization of an ontology of individuation would depend on subordinating both the individual and the pre-individual to the operation of individuation itself. Both would be subordinate to the differential operation that gives rise to the difference between them, revealing the mutual determination of Being and individuating differences.

The concept of operation must not be mistaken for the mere celebration of

⁴⁹ In short, it seems to me that if a cause is either infinitely complex, or indeterminate in itself, it is capable of transmitting a degree of freedom. I would only remark that the adequate ground for this thesis can only be an ontology of difference. Let us push Spinoza in the direction of a Deleuzian interpretation: self-cause must be aligned with self-difference, and being must be conceived dynamically as power or *conatus*, an active striving.

process over product, flux over fixity. A brief and brilliant essay by Pierre Macherey, “La philosophie comme opération,” can help us articulate this concept in more detail, and draw our attention to the way determination works in a field of immanent production. Macherey may be best known in the U.S. as the author of *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), which earned him the lasting label of Marxist literary critic, despite the fact that the bulk of his work addresses the history of philosophy, and his relationship to Marxism has been long and complicated. Though critical of Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza,⁵⁰ he has much more in common with Deleuze than can be gleaned from this dispute, not the least of which is a lasting interest in Spinoza’s philosophy (Macherey having published seven books and numerous articles on the subject) as well as a thesis advisor, Georges Canguilhem.⁵¹

“La philosophie comme opération” distinguishes between what Macherey calls operative and inoperative activity, tracing the latter back to Aristotle’s conception of “praxis.”⁵² Aristotle opposes “praxis” not, as one might assume, to theory, but to “poiesis,” which involves “une production d’oeuvre, c’est à dire ... une activité technique qui s’exerce en vue d’un but extérieur à la démarche qui le poursuit, donc sans finalité intrinsèque ou immanente” (Macherey, “Opération” 69/28). “Praxis,” on the other hand—whose privileged example is the very activity of living—is defined by Aristotle as activity for its own sake: “son sujet coïncide avec son objet, et ... elle trouve dans cette identité sa justification unique” (70/29).

We have already seen a version of this opposition between praxis and poiesis in the romantic treatment of the literary work, which thrived on the tensions between

⁵⁰ See “Deleuze dans Spinoza” in *Avec Spinoza (Etudes sur la doctrine et l’histoire du spinozisme)*.

⁵¹ In 1961 Canguilhem directed Macherey’s Masters thesis, “Philosophie et politique chez Spinoza”; in 1947 he co-directed (with Jean Hyppolite) Deleuze’s thesis on Hume for Deleuze’s *Diplôme d’études supérieures*.

⁵² See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 4.

form and the overcoming of form, poetry and process, conscious intention and natural development. Indeed, the notion of organic form, so crucial to the romantics as well as the New Critics, was meant to reconcile these oppositions with the metaphor of the work as organism: both subject and object of its own development, the work became a totalizing process with an end in itself, a form that “shapes itself as it develops itself from within,” so that “the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” (Coleridge, “Shakespeare” 321). Analogous to a natural process, the work was meant to be the ground of its own value and necessity.

Like the exercise of Kant’s practical reason, Macherey writes, an activity that exists wholly in and for itself tends toward an extreme formalism, free from the material interests that belong to a world of necessity, and free from the constraint of [external] determination, so that, “dans son action, [il] n’a jamais rapport qu’à lui-même” (73/33). In this article, Macherey describes a certain view of philosophy, but we can recognize a familiar treatment of literature here as well, one that would subordinate the external relations of a literary work to the interminable unfolding of its internal meaning: literature as infinite subject, and as mirror of the absolute.

While appearing to identify process and product, and to make one into the reflection and image of the other, this view in fact favors notions of origin, even those of conscious design, because the unity it asserts always occurs on behalf of an ordinary subject or transcendent principle (such as a principle of vitalism), and takes the form of an emanation. As Alberto Toscano adeptly observes, insofar as the unity of process and product is “conceived of as being without remainder,” it will have to rely on an external principle to account for this very unity (Toscano 183).

Autonomous organization, in other words, depends on a heterogeneous principle (ibid). The individual that results from this model becomes, Toscano argues, like “a black box, a *Ding an Sich* autistically withdrawn from any form of examination or

relationality” (ibid.).

In opposition to this pure activity that coincides only with itself, which, Macherey argues, is not merely a “subjective practice” but essentially “a subject without process” insofar as its aim is to reveal the infinite potential already given at its origin (73/33), Macherey proposes a notion of “operation” as “objective practice.” This is a practice, he explains, that is traversed by determination and externality, and thereby produces objects. Its objective status allows it to articulate itself with respect to a wider process. It does not emanate from a transcendent principle or intentional subject: “[Opération], si elle fait référence à un opérateur,” writes Macherey, “ne s’appuie pas sur lui comme sur un principe autonome, qui pourrait être détaché, *tanquam imperium in imperio*, de l’activité à laquelle il prend part; mais elle le rencontre plutôt comme un moment dans le développement de l’ordre auquel elle-même elle appartient” (ibid.). Operation and operator belong to the same order; they participate in its immanent construction even as they determine one another reciprocally.

The fact that an operation results in determinate *works* allows it to effectuate itself with respect to other works, and retrospectively on its own conditions,

de se transformer et de modifier ses conditions en même temps qu’elle exécute ses effets. Car une opération n’est nullement préfigurée et en quelque sorte préétablie dans le système de ses conditions, dont elle ne serait qu’une application ou un cas particulier. Mais elle s’effectue, au sens actif de cette expression, en rapport avec des oeuvres dont la réalisation, en retour, bouleverse le champ objectif à l’intérieur duquel elles sont produites.

Opérer, c’est donc prendre part...⁵³ (74/34)

⁵³ We can read here the echo of Louis Althusser’s assertion that to practice philosophy is to take up a

To operate is to effectuate a determinate change from within an immanently constituted field.

Although Deleuze would have disagreed with Macherey over the role of the negative in determination, his notion of individuation has much in common with what is described in this article. He calls the author of a work the “operator” of an Idea (257/199), which she confronts as an imperative as much as a problem of which she is merely a function or an emergent element. The two can be understood as reciprocally determining from common genetic elements. Most importantly, and with echoes of Spinozism, Deleuze refers to a “heterogeneity in the production mechanism” of being (212/274). This heterogeneity “cannot simply refer to internal difference, but must be extended to the claim that there is no unilateral emanation of beings, no ontological preformism” (Toscano 179).

Individuation, in short, must be conceived as an asymmetrical operation, and as the production of both the ground and the grounded, the individual and its pre-individual problematic. “Asymmetry” describes the origin and positivity of a heterogeneous causal process (*DR* 20/35), where being determined by a cause does not mean being identical to it, being reducible to it, or even being made to resemble it.

We have seen how Blanchot and his heritage seek to account for the newness of literary creation by invoking the category of possibility, only to hold the work at a distance from any possibility that would pre-figure it. According to this logic, creation is either dominated by an already-given representation, or else it must appear as a radical break with representation, falling outside of all conceptual determination. At best, the work is determined negatively, and the genesis of the illusion of representation—that is, the illusion of the work’s possibility—is not explained. The

position, within philosophy as well as within the wider conjuncture. See, most notably, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* (1967).

problem lies with the category of possibility itself, and its opposition to the real. “Chaque fois que nous posons le problème en termes de possible et de réel,” Deleuze argues, “nous sommes forcés de concevoir l’existence comme un surgissement brut, acte pur, saut qui s’opère toujours derrière notre dos, soumis à la loi du tout ou rien” (273/211). In place of the conceptual pair of the possible-real, Deleuze proposes that of the virtual-actual, where the virtual describes a determinable problematic field, possessing “la réalité d’une tâche à remplir,” while actualization is governed by divergence and creation, not resemblance. In other words, actualization is an asymmetrical process:

L’actualisation ne rompt pas moins avec la ressemblance comme processus qu’avec l’identité comme principe. Jamais les termes actuels ne ressemblent à la virtualité qu’ils actualisent... L’actualisation, la différenciation, en ce sens, est toujours une véritable création.
(273/212)

The problem orients and conditions its solutions, but these do not resemble their problem (274/212). This non-resemblance is due to the operation of individualization, which individualizes spatio-temporal dynamisms along with its solutions in order to provide them with sense, orientation, and duration.⁵⁴ That is, unlike realization, which *takes place in* space and time so that the actual existence of an object becomes either redundant with its conceptual representation, or falls wholly outside of it, individualization *creates* a space and time concomitant with its objects. It articulates them in their relation with an external milieu.

Literature as operation should thus be understood not only genetically, but “ecologically,” so that its individuation defines its external relations no less than its

⁵⁴ A technical note: “individualization” is not the same as “actualization,” for actualization refers to phenomena (“bodies and states of affairs”), while individualization refers to noumena alone. Individualization is presupposed by actualization as part of its process.

internal dynamisms (cf. *DR* 280/216). That is, the work distinguishes itself from its problematic field, selecting linguistic, sensory, and ideational elements, but it also articulates itself with respect to external environments—such as institutions, markets, and literary histories. It individuates the literary-historical space in which it turns, casting light on the features of this space as a means of throwing itself into relief. Let us suppose, then, that literary form is a kind of bas-relief determined by local variations in a landscape that is not indifferent to it: form as a fold in a characteristic terrain.

Underestimating the asymmetry of literary production is a common mistake of novice writers no less than of poor critics: the former think they can convey joy or doubt, for example, by creating a joyful character or a doubtful event, while the latter think they can access a writer's experience or a set of historical circumstances through their own experience of a work. In both cases, cause and effect are confused, for what goes in to a work is does not resemble the effect it will have on a reader. That is, literature is transformative; it transforms the very elements that constitute it, so that the important thing is not, or not only, to recognize the effect, but to follow the asymmetrical and transformative process that produced it. As Marcel Proust observes on the resemblance of writing to life, "les mêmes comparaisons qui sont fausses si on part d'elles, peuvent être vraies si on y aboutit" (Proust 3:936/2288). All literature is Proustian in this sense: it records the dynamic and asymmetrical production of meaning, and demonstrates the difference between its own premises and its conclusions.

4. Replace the concepts of the interiority, self-reflection, and closure of a work with that of a relative consistency that constitutes itself at its own limits.

We know that the critical tradition has accounted for the integrity of a literary

work in many contradictory ways, and has saddled it with metaphors from the organic to the structural in order to explain its self-organizing behavior. Yet what the vast majority of these accounts have in common is their reliance on received ideas about the nature of being, including a philosophically entrenched opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and necessity. A differential ontology—that is, an ontology that privileges constitutive relations over entities—offers a different account of the work’s organization because it involves a different conception of organization as such. Namely, the self-identity presumed to be the only possible basis of the work’s cohesion can be replaced with a repetition and a condensation revolving around a series of differences, differences that open up the work to its own non-difference with its outside. In this view, the work “cannot be thought as a whole of its parts, as organic. It is ... neither heteronymous, since its measure... is immanent to it, nor autonomous since it is composed of heterogeneities” (Toscano 65). Rather, participating in a differential process, it “gives rise to an asymmetrical heterogenesis, producing an outside which is not reflected back into it” (ibid.). Likewise, its unity and wholeness “ne seraient pas principe, mais ... au contraire ‘l’effet’ du multiple et de ses parties décousues” (Deleuze, *Proust* 195/163).

Because individuation is asymmetrical, it is not only genetic, but *heterogenetic*. In a heterogenetic system, “la structure ne se définit nullement par une autonomie du tout, par une prégnance du tout sur les parties ... la structure se définit au contraire par la nature de certains éléments atomiques qui prétendent rendre compte à la fois de la formation des touts et de la variation de leurs parties” (*L’île déserte* 242). This is a view of structure that avoids the abstract opposition of the one to the multiple, unity to plurality, conceiving instead of a multiplicity that coheres only insofar as division would entail a qualitative change of state. Its consistency, in other words, is relative to its transformations and determines their threshold. As Simondon

writes, an individual is no more than “the reality of a constitutive relation,” not the interiority of an already-constituted term (Simondon 68). We can thus refer provisionally to what is “internal” and “external” to a literary work only to the extent that the work is the site of an active negotiation and exchange between its own internality and externality: the work as “the theater and the agent” of its relations (ibid.).

Consider, in particular, the example of genre as a “heterogenetic” element of a literary work. Is it properly internal or external to the work? Properly, neither: it may be grasped as an “internal” tension which the work transforms into a solution, just as it may function as a set of “external” constraints or conventions, themselves subject to change on the basis of an accumulation of repeated elements, or a shift in institutional investments. This example of genre is especially illuminating because it highlights the significance of point of view for a theory of individuation. For a different point of view (for a critic writing a theory of tragedy, for example), a genre may be grasped as an individual in its own right, while the genre’s pre-individual, problematic element may be identified with the tensions among particular works and cultural conventions that it emerges to resolve.⁵⁵ Its external milieu (for example, an institution, a journal, or a critical practice) is likewise not an indifferent, homogenous space in which the genre comes to be inscribed, but an emergent dimension of the genre itself (or better, that which provides the genre with dimensionality and sense).

5. Replace the subject and object of literary analysis with the multiplicity of a literary

⁵⁵ What counts as an “individual” with respect to a milieu is no less fixed than what counts as “virtual” with respect to the “actual.” The distinction Deleuze draws between virtual and actual is too often taken to be a rigid one, when in fact it, likewise, corresponds to a point of view. The virtual/actual relation is a differential one, a thesis Deleuze conveys best in his work on the cinema. Consider these lines from *L’image-temps*: “En effet, il n’y a pas de virtuel qui ne devienne actuel par rapport à l’actuel, celui-ci devenant virtuel sous ce même rapport: c’est un envers et un endroit parfaitement réversibles” (*L’image-temps* 94/69).

assemblage.

“L’oeuvre d’art modern n’a pas de problème de sens, elle n’a qu’un problème d’usage” Deleuze writes provocatively in *Proust et les signs* (176/146). “Au logos, organe et organon dont il faut découvrir le sens dans le tout auquel il appartient, s’oppose l’anti-logos, machine et machinerie dont le sens... dépend uniquement du fonctionnement” (176/146). Characterizing literature as a machine, Deleuze attempts to relocate the realm of truth in literary interpretation to the level of effects rather than causes. And it is important to note that “literary interpretation” here refers to the interpretation *constitutive of* a work as well as the interpretation to which a work gives rise—that is, to both the writer’s and the critic’s interpretive activity. In this view, truth or meaning—the object of interpretation—is neither waiting to be discovered, nor created *ex nihilo*, but manufactured on the basis of an encounter. “Nul plus que Proust n’a insisté sur le point suivant,” Deleuze writes: “que la vérité est produite ... extraite à partir de nos impressions, creusée dans notre vie, livrée dans une oeuvre” (176/146-7). Above all, Deleuze insists on the importance of the notion of impression: “Toute production part de l’impression, parce qu’elle seule réunit sur soi le hasard de la rencontre et la nécessité de l’effet” (177/147).

In his collaboration with Guattari, Deleuze gives us a specific term for an individuated, literary multiplicity that constitutes itself at its own limits: an assemblage [un agencement]. I would like to turn briefly to the notion of the assemblage now, because the pragmatic terrain on which it is articulated can help us approach the question of individuation from another angle, as our analysis shifts from ontological to epistemological concerns—that is, as we shift from the question “what is a work?” to “how is known?”

In their introduction to *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari contend that books are multiplicities of the order of “assemblages,” “rhizomes” or “little

machines.” From Deleuze’s revision of *Proust et les signes* (1964; revised 1973) to Deleuze and Guattari’s work on *Kafka* (1975) onward, machines and assemblages come to characterize the activity of writing no less than the apparatus of the book. Specifically, they characterize the production and organization of signs on the basis of sensible encounters. An assemblage can thus be defined as the double articulation of a form and a content, and a form and a substance, both with respect to a milieu that Deleuze and Guattari further qualify as a territory:⁵⁶

D’après un premier axe, horizontal, un agencement comporte deux segments, l’un de contenu, l’autre d’expression. D’une part il est *agencement machinique* de corps, d’actions et de passions, mélange de corps réagissant les uns sur les autres; d’autre part, *agencement collectif d’énonciation*, d’actes et d’énoncés, transformations incorporelles s’attribuant aux corps. Mais, d’après un axe vertical orienté, l’agencement a d’une part des côtés territoriaux ou reterritoriaisés, qui le stabilisent, d’autre part des pointes de déterritorialisation qui l’emportent (*Mille plateaux* 112/88).

Assemblages “assemble” [agencer] with other assemblages, and can be broken down into multiplicities of smaller assemblages. For the activity of writing, Deleuze asserts that the assemblage is in fact the minimum unit of reality, which is to say that there is no simple unit, because the minimum is already complex and relational:

L’unité réelle minima, ce n’est pas le mot, ni l’idée ou le concept, ni le signifiant, mais l’agencement. C’est toujours un agencement qui produit les énoncés. Les énoncés n’ont pas pour cause un sujet qui

⁵⁶ In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze does not abandon the conceptual couple individual-milieu, but re-articulates it in increasingly complex ways. He retains the category of “milieu,” for example, but qualifies certain milieu as “territories” when, beyond a mere block of space and time, they become expressive and qualitative for an individual. See “1837: De la ritournelle,” especially 386/314.

agirait comme sujet d'énonciation, pas plus qu'ils ne se rapportent à des sujets comme sujets d'énoncé. L'énoncé est le produit d'un agencement, toujours collectif, qui met en jeu, en nous et hors de nous, des populations, des multiplicités, des territoires, des devenirs, des affects, des événements (*Dialogues* 65/51).

That is, a statement is individuated from a collective linguistic field, that field being the real cause of the statement as well as of the statement's subjective (or expressive) dimension. Likewise, its objective (or content) dimension is a product of the trajectories of populations, affects, and events that traverse it.

In sum, the components of any assemblage are a battery of variables individuated from multiple fields simultaneously—linguistic, material, social, territorial, emotional, evental; thus “un agencement dans sa multiplicité travaille à la fois forcément sur des flux sémiotiques, des flux matériels et des flux sociaux” (*Mille plateaux* 33-34/22-23). With their notion of assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari reject the traditional division of subject and object imposed by representational schemas. “On n'a plus une tripartition entre un champ de réalité, le monde, un champ de représentation, le livre, et un champ de subjectivité, l'auteur,” they write (*ibid.*). Rather, “objective” and “subjective” become reciprocally determining, internal dimensions of the assemblage itself, produced on the basis of its variables, just as we saw spatio-temporal dynamisms were produced as characteristic dimensions of individuation on the basis of a pre-individual problematic.

We might say that an assemblage not only comprises pre-individual germs of subjects and objects *in itself*, but that it produces a subjective and an objective dimension *for itself*. Subjects and objects are not errors for Deleuze, to be tossed aside once and for all in favor of the truth of pure multiplicities. Rather, they are transcendental illusions. The only so-called “error” is the priority of these categories,

for subjects and objects are produced by multiplicities as features of the extensive world; they persist alongside them as their effects, and demand to be analyzed as such. The opening of the second chapter of *Différence et répétition* is especially instructive on this point. Here Deleuze presents the idea that, while the individual instances that constitute a repetition are differentiated from one another, we cannot properly speak of a repetition “in itself”; rather, repetition exists only in the mind or self that contemplates it (*Différence et répétition* 96/70). Yet rather than posit an originary subjectivity that would pre-exist a given repetition, Deleuze argues the very opposite: that contemplation is a dimension of repetition itself; that the very existence of repetition entails a point of view, which is produced as a contraction or “passive synthesis” of the repetition, a synthesis that (true to the etymology of “contemplation”) creates a space of observation. Exactly the same can be said of the assemblage: the assemblage is a unit of analysis whose subject and object do not pre-exist the operations that produce them and that bind them to the particularities of this process.⁵⁷

In *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, Pierre Macherey offers us a vision of literary criticism that would proceed from the same stipulation as Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage. Criticism is neither an empiricism nor an evaluative practice, Macherey contends, both of which activities confront already given objects, but rather a form of knowledge that constructs its proper object. This is not to say that the reader is the “true” author of a literary work, as in some exaggerated version of reader-response criticism, for, as Macherey states brusquely, “lire et écrire ne sont pas deux opérations équivalentes ou réversible” (22/13). Rather, this is to advocate for the distinctiveness of critical knowledge. Macherey writes:

Connaître ce n’est pas écouter une telle parole préexistante, qui serait

⁵⁷ My understanding of the assemblage owes much to a presentation given by Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, “L’analyse des agencements et le groupe de lutte comme expérimentateur collectif,” l’Université de Lille 3, February 7, 2007.

fable, et la traduire: c'est inventer une nouvelle parole... Connaître, ce n'est donc pas retrouver ou reconstituer un sens latent: oublié ou caché. C'est constituer un savoir *neuf* (14/6).

Criticism does not seek to reiterate or reproduce its object, but to produce it, manifesting it in a new discourse: “la critique littéraire... est une certaine forme de savoir: elle a alors un objet, qui n'est pas sa donnée mais son produit” (15/7). Such production is possible because the critical object is not “objectively” given, but articulated through the rigor of a critical reading, and through the writing of a new discourse. In short, “la méthode, pas plus que l'objet, n'est donnée au départ; ils se déterminent l'un l'autre conjointement” (17/8). Thus Macherey is able to conclude, “entre le critique et l'écrivain, une *différence* irréductible doit être posée au départ. ... [L]'oeuvre telle qu'elle est écrite par son auteur n'est pas exactement l'oeuvre telle qu'elle est expliquée par le critique” (15/7). Macherey pushes the idea of this irreducible difference even further, suggesting that it lies not between two different literary works, nor even between two different points of view, but between two aspects of the selfsame object. “[P]ar l'utilisation d'un langage neuf,” he writes, “le critique fait éclater en l'oeuvre une différence, fait apparaître qu'elle est *autre qu'elle n'est*” (ibid.). Perhaps the difference Macherey uncovers here is a difference constitutive of the nature of literature as such. And perhaps this difference does not belong only to criticism, but, more elementally, to reading.

Criticism may expose the difference in a work, in sum, but this is possible only if literature is something that already differs in itself, something that is essentially constituted by self-difference. In their pursuit of an ontologically complex and self-differing object, Macherey and Deleuze share a common vision. Constitutive difference in the work is what allows it to be thought in continuity with its historical or linguistic context, yet without its being reducible to that context; and it is what allows

the critic to produce an object of critical knowledge that is at once original and distinct, and yet continuous with the author's work.

CHAPTER FOUR

RHETORIC AND NECESSITY IN BECKETT'S *MOLLOY*, *MALONE MEURT*, AND *L'INNOMMABLE*

"C'est notre image—au miroir de l'absolu littéraire—qui nous est renvoyée. Et cette vérité massive qui nous est assénée: nous ne sommes pas sortis de l'époque du Sujet."

—L'absolu littéraire, 27

"...on n'a pas besoin d'essayer, ça va tout seul..."

—L'innommable, 192

"Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant?" Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable* begins. "Sans me le demander. Dire je" (7/291), or more symmetrically in English, "I, say I." In this interrogative opening that acknowledges, at least formally, the traditional requirements of beginning a novel with place, time, and character (Clément 125), the question "who?" is underscored by what is proposed as its "unquestioning" response. But what does it mean "to say I" in the context of Beckett's trilogy? Who says "I"?

This question of "saying I" will guide my approach to Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L'innommable* in what follows. It is a question that needs to be referred to both a literary and a philosophical history, as well as one that marks a point of entry into a set of texts that has been treated as a "work" and at the same time, like all works, constitutes its own response to the question of what a work of literature is. The text's self-presentation and self-allegorization is another sort of "saying I,"⁵⁸ a

⁵⁸ We might, moreover, pose the question of the "saying 'I'" of the trilogy itself: the extent to which these novels—six, in fact, if we count Beckett's English translations along with their French precursors—constitute a coherent and unitary work. I am following the convention among critics in referring to the three postwar novels as a "trilogy," though it might be observed that Beckett himself disliked the term, requesting that the "3-in-1" editions published in Britain and the U.S. (Calder Publications and Grove Press, respectively) appear without this term (see S.E. Gontarski, Introduction to *Nohow On*, xi-xii). Both presses originally entitled the collection *Three Novels*, though the current

“saying I” dominated by themes of failure, silence, passivity, and ignorance. Yet in this work of Beckett’s that explicitly thematizes the perils of writing, I would argue that what is at issue is precisely the referentiality and self-referentiality of the discourse. In what follows, I will demonstrate how and why the trilogy’s actual functioning can not correspond to the compelling images it offers of itself, and argue, ultimately, that it is in the very discrepancy between the two that the text’s most productive operation lies.

Both formally and thematically, as the majority of its critics acknowledge, Beckett’s trilogy raises questions about the classical conception of the subject, about the aesthetic aims of writing, and about what constitutes the stable, coherent contours of a literary work. In Beckett’s work, the traditional goals of the novel—let us say, an accumulation of knowledge about human life, a creation of realistic characters, and a display of linguistic or literary-cultural prowess—are thwarted from the outset. Yet what is less apparent is that those readings that attempt to explore a negative or critical relation to the concepts of the “subject” and the “work” through Beckett’s texts risk reinstating these very concepts through their own processes of reading. Readings that approach Beckett’s work as a kind of critical allegory for its own undoing—or as governed by what we might call an “aesthetics of failure”—might be appealing, but they are ultimately unsatisfactory. They are unsatisfactory not only because they reinstate at another remove what they seek to criticize, but because they neglect the very operation by which this allegory or this aesthetics is produced. Before we confront the limitations of these readings and consider an alternative, let us examine the images that the text offers as characterizations of itself.

Calder edition has the word “trilogy” printed sideways on the book’s cover. The three novels were originally, and continue to be, published as separate volumes in French by Éditions de minuit.

I.

“Qui parle dans les livres de Samuel Beckett?” Maurice Blanchot asks in his seminal 1953 essay “Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?”, referring to the postwar trilogy. “Quel est ce « Je » infatigable qui apparemment dit toujours la même chose?” (278). These novels are inhabited by speakers that become increasingly difficult to identify and distinguish from one another, and whose integrity of body and personality remains uncertain. Through them, fragmentation is foregrounded, figured not only in the bodies and selves that circulate in the stories, but in the discontinuity of the narratives, punctuated with ignorance, corrections, silence, and ellipses. Molloy begins the narrative of his confused journey towards his mother’s room nearly blind and dumb, struggling with memory. On his way, the toes of either his left or right foot go missing, one of his legs is gradually shortening, and even his pneumatic bicycle horn is “suffocating.” His legs are bad, stiffening like his crutches, his teeth are bad, his eyes are bad; he “bristle[s] with boils,” sweats foully, drools, and “oozes urine, day and night” (at least, “ce n’est pas à moi que l’urémie fermera les yeux,” he reasons [133/81]). His memory is bad, so that he confuses the woman Lousse (or Sophie, or Mrs. Loy), with the only woman he has ever “rubbed up against” (Ruth, or Edith, or Rose), and both of them with his own mother (whose name he can not remember). Yet he seems to desire a more profound disintegration still, longing for the earth to swallow him up (ibid.); on sleeping in Lousse’s garden, he writes:

Et il y avait un autre bruit, celui de ma vie que faisait sienne ce jardin chevauchant la terre des abîmes et des déserts. Oui, il m’arrivait d’oublier d’être. Alors je n’étais plus cette boîte fermée à laquelle je devais de m’être si bien conservé, mais une cloison s’abattait et je me remplissais de racines et de tiges bien sages. (79/49)

With the eruption of roots and earth into the “closed jar” of his person, Molloy

certainly suggests an apt metaphor for the fragmentation of the subject by language.

Molloy is no more fixed for his pursuer Moran, for he might also be “Mollose,” “Mollote,” “Molloc” (the English text even proposes “Malone”). Pursuing his quarry, Moran gradually comes to resemble Molloy in his increasing mental confusion and physical disintegration—so much that a few early critics have concluded that the pair must constitute two continuous halves of the same person, whose journey is narrated out of order, so that Moran is the original protagonist and Molloy the “subconscious, antithetical self” into which Moran slowly deteriorates (Kern 10).

In *Malone meurt* we find that Malone shares certain infirmities with these previous protagonists, as if some free-floating parasite were traveling from one book to the next, and recalling Beckett’s *Proust* book where features’ passing from one of Proust’s characters to the next is described as the metamorphosis of some “atavistic embryo” that has broken through its chrysalis (*Proust* 39)—terms more befitting a horror story, it would seem, than *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The breakdown of the physical self seems to be mirrored by a breakdown of identity, and by a strange passage between selves. Malone, who, like Molloy finds himself confined to a room without remembering his arrival, writes, in phrases nearly identical to Molloy’s, “Je ne me rappelle pas comment j’y suis arrivé. Dans une ambulance peut-être, un véhicule quelconque certainement (13-14/183).” He charts his deterioration; and, like Molloy who felt himself merging with the garden soil, Malone, too, testifies to “ces périodes où je me liquéfie et passe à l’état de boue” (83/225), and where the content of his head “glissait et se vidait comme à travers des vannes, à ma grande joie, jusqu’à ce que finalement il ne restât plus rien” (82/224). Waiting to die, Malone tells himself stories in the meantime, “des histoires ni belles ni vilaines, calmes ... presque sans vie, comme l’artiste” (8/180).

The characters of the trilogy present some awareness of the abyssal nature of these repetitions. Malone frequently refers to an “other,” which might be the principle character of his stories, Macmann, formerly Saposcat, about whom Malone writes with the same stub of a pencil and in the same exercise book as he writes about himself (55/207). In fact, Beckett composed *Malone meurt* in just this sort of notebook;⁵⁹ Malone draws attention to the abyssal nature of this situation when he says, “j’écris sur moi, avec le même crayon, dans le même cahier, que sur lui. C’est que ce n’est plus moi... mais un autre dont la vie commence à peine” (ibid.). Macmann turns out to have much in common not only with Malone, but with Beckett’s other personalities as well: like Molloy he is a wanderer, and has the same trick of tying his hat to his overcoat with a piece of string (as the narrators of Beckett’s short stories “La fin” and “Le calmant” do before them); like Murphy he has “gulls’ eyes” (29). Such nightmarish recurrences of plot and character give one the sense of Beckett’s having created a kind of alternate universe, where events are generated from the combination and recombination of a fixed set of narrative elements.

Among the mutations and repetitions in Beckett’s works, however, the character that reoccurs with the most consistency is the narrative ‘I’ (Clément 84). Simon Critchley describes Malone as “an identity minimally held together by a series of stories” (193), but it seems rather that the opposite is true: that the only thing uniting Malone’s stories—fragmented, discontinuous, overlapping, and at times a little boring (“Quel ennui,” even their author laments [23/189])—is the presumed continuity of the self of their narrator, which sustains interest in the narratives for the reflection they might cast on his person and situation. Malone suggests that he will tell stories in order to “pay less heed to himself,” but this only seems to reinforce the sense that

⁵⁹ As I had the opportunity of confirming in a recent exposition of Beckett’s work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, 2007.

when Malone tells tales of other people and things, what he is “really” talking about is himself. More importantly, where bodies are broken and failing, the narrative “I” becomes the site of continuity, reassemblage, and synthesis.

Unlike the uncanny duo Molloy-Moran, whose relationship remains indeterminate within the confines of the first book, the reflection of Malone in his principle character Macmann (“son of Man”) can be understood as the expression of the writer in his characters, an incarnation of the creator in his creation. Yet halfway through *Malone meurt*, Malone exclaims, looking forward to his demise, “A ce moment-là c’en sera fait des Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran et autres Malone, à moins que ça ne continue dans l’outre-tombe” (103/236)—suggesting that not only Molloy and Moran but characters from Beckett’s earlier novels (are these all “autres Malones”?) may be mere fictions sprung from the mind of this ageless and impotent writer. With Malone’s death it will be all over for this crew, unless Malone chooses to kill them first by “les frappant sur la tête ou en y foutant le feu” (ibid.), as he in fact attempts with a bloody hatchet massacre at the end of his story.

On the one hand, the character of Malone in the second book solves a problem set up in the first—that of the uncanny symmetry between Molloy and Moran’s respective journeys and degenerations—by relocating the narrative of both books in a space of interiority, Malone’s mind, and by guaranteeing the coherency of the two books with the form of the subject, here the writer-hero. It should not be overlooked that the historical form of the novel and that of the development of the individual have long been intertwined, and that the concept of both emerged at roughly the same literary-historical period.⁶⁰ Yet perhaps even more significant than the novel’s ties to

⁶⁰ The novel’s principle plots, for example—the quest narrative, the marriage-plot, the Bildungsroman, the Künstlerroman—are all oriented around the growth and eventual fulfillment of the individual. As for the historical coincidence of the novel and the concept of the individual, I have in mind, on the one hand, the appearance of seminal novels such as *Don Quixote* (1605), *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and *Pamela* (1741); and on the other hand Descartes’ *Meditations* (1641) and

the individual are its ties to interiority: both the French and the English novels have their beginnings in sustained psychological explorations, where the action of the plot is grounded in the mental space and narrative voice of their heroes and heroines.⁶¹ Moreover, the form of the novel mirrors the conditions of its reception. Rising to prominence with the increased literacy rates of the middle class, the novel is distinct from other literary genres in that it has no historical ties to performance, only to solitary inscription and silent contemplation.

In Beckett's trilogy, *Malone meurt* appears to alleviate the ambiguous origin of Molloy and Moran's strange relationship; it provides a supplemental point of reflection, and serves as the middle term in a series of abyssal retreats into a mental space that can absorb and account for what came before it. But no sooner does Malone suggest, "Vous direz que c'est dans ma tête" (78/221), than he adds, "et il me semble souvent en effet que je suis dans une tête, que ces huit, non, ces six parois sont en os massif, mais de là à dire que c'est ma tête à moi, non, ça jamais" (ibid.). Malone, too, the product of another's mental machinations? Just as Malone appears *post factum* as the author and originator of Molloy, the unnamed hero of *L'innommable*, in turn, seems to take credit for authoring Malone and all the rest, whom he calls "these sufferers of my pains" (303).

L'innommable is a striking conclusion to the narrative logic established in the first two books, to this series of monologic meditations in which "each successive volume ... consumes its predecessor, swallowing and negating it" (Banville 20). This

its Enlightenment legacy, coupled with certain sociological factors such as the rise of industrial capitalism and the spread of Protestantism, following the Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights in England (1689) and the Déclaration des droits de l'Homme in France (1789).

⁶¹ Consider Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* and especially Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, which differs from the much more episodic narratives of the time (Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, for example) by the real and sustained coherency it gains from the psychological integrity of its narrator.

third book seems to be narrated by the voice of the one responsible for inventing Malone as well as Molloy and all the rest—someone or something that says “I” but occasionally “we,” someone named (or naming) Mahood, or Basil, or something named Worm, if Worm is even capable of words. Moreover, the motif of physical degeneration is taken to new heights. The narrator, who may or may not be Mahood, is at first short of an arm and a leg, managing on his crutches only because, he suggests, “j’aurais conservé apparemment suffisamment d’aisselle” (58/321). Later, nothing remains of Mahood but a head, torso and defunct penis, the whole bunch “piqué, à la manière d’une gerbe, dans une jarre profonde” (67/327), adorned with lights and posted outside of a Paris restaurant. Ultimately this character is reconceived as Worm, a shapeless heap, naked, hairless, with a giant head grown out of an ear, faceless but for “un oeil, hagard, chevalin, toujours ouvert” (117/356-7). Here the character doubling and self-reflexive narration seems to fuse into near-total indistinction, the distance between narrator and narrated collapses, and the possibility of an endless generation of new speakers disturbs our sense of closure, or of the “I” as a principle of this closure.

In short, on the one hand, we seem to waver between a successive series of points of reflection and an ever-widening field of elements to be subsumed. Yet on the other hand, how do we explain the nature of Beckett’s images: not consumption and mastery, but expulsion, uncertainty and inability; not generation and proliferation befitting the creation of such a cast of characters and series of worlds, but images of enclosure, diminishment, deterioration, and disintegration?

In *L’innommable* as in *Malone meurt*, the idea of some continuity of the narrative voice, like the notion of Malone’s authorship, not only logically holds together a series of fragmented stories by giving them a common origin, but offers a figure or series of figures to represent the status of their integration. Beckett suggests

an interchangeability between Malone's person and his "tepid" stories, "presque sans vie, comme l'artiste" (8/180); and in all three novels, at the very least, the activity of the central character's writing or speaking is thematized to the extent that each narrative, which more or less follows the novelistic tradition of taking its title from the name of its principle character,⁶² becomes a stand-in for its fictional author. Malone, as first-person narrator, has no existence outside of his own "saying I"—these "quelques lignes pour me rappeler que moi aussi je subsiste" (182/283). The narrator of *L'innommable*, who compulsively recites stories and compulsively comments on his own recitation, and even Molloy, whose story supposedly comes to us on sheets of paper exchanged for weekly sums, are likewise inseparable from the act of self-narration.

But what does it mean for figures like these to represent the act of writing or storytelling? More precisely, for Beckett's work to seek in this cast of confused, degenerate, and degenerating characters, this band of "miscreated puppets" approaching their end or functioning somnambulistically—in pieces, parts, and heaps—in some limbo beyond, images of the status of its own integrity and autonomy? To present the frustrated movements of these characters' broken-down adventures as allegories of its own composition? These novels are constructed from scenes of impoverishment, deterioration, dismemberment, literal decomposition that suggests a metaphorical de-composition; they feature an hallucinatory series of M-named personalities that bleed confusedly into one another, a sequence of uncertain forms that suggest, perhaps, as Malone muses, "les formes sont variées où l'immuable

⁶² I say "more or less," because, as Steven Connor points out, *Malone meurt* is more precisely named not after its principle character, but after an event that is actually absent from text (Malone's death), which structures the first-person narrative but cannot be included in it. In fact, Beckett originally titled this story "L'Absent." See Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 70. After Richard L. Admussen, *The Samuel Beckett Manuscripts: A Study* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1979), 66.

se soulage d'être sans forme" (38/197). What kind of allegory of writing is being written here?

II.

The notion that Beckett's work is representative of something like an "aesthetics of failure" has become a commonplace among Beckett's critics,⁶³ with the majority drawing on Beckett's *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1949) as the source of this reading.⁶⁴ Beckett wrote the *Three Dialogues* as a dramatic vignette, staging a dialogue between himself and friend Duthuit on three painters, yet it has often been treated more directly as "the nearest thing we have to an explicit statement of [Beckett's] esthetic tastes or program" (Bersani, *Balzac* 301); and even as constituting "a highly suggestive preface to the trilogy itself" (Trezise 7), positions which are not at all certain given the stated subject of the text and its theatrical presentation. That is, we should not avoid submitting the claims of this text to a reading any more than we would the claims of any of Beckett's texts, fictional or not.

In the *Dialogues* Beckett's persona announces a "fidelity to failure" in the work of Bram van Velde, by which he means that van Velde is "the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" (125). Similarly, in Tal Coat's work he finds a "preference" for "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with

⁶³ At the origin of this trend are Richard Coe's *Beckett* (1964) and Michael Robinson's *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (1969); other major statements include Theodore Adorno's "Trying to Understand Endgame" (1961), John Pilling's *Samuel Beckett* (1976), Alan Jenkins' "A Lifelong Fidelity to Failure" in the *Times Literary Supplement* (November 14, 1986), Thomas Trezise's *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (1990), Jean Yamasaki Toyama's *Beckett's Game: Self and Language in the Trilogy* (1991), Leo Bersani's *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko and Resnais* (1993), Simon Critchley's *Very Little, Almost Nothing* (1997), and the edited collection *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative* (2005). For an indispensable survey of Beckett criticism in three languages through the mid-1990's, see Murphy, P. J. *Critique of Beckett Criticism: A Guide to Research in English, French, and German*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994.

⁶⁴ By 1989, Ruby Cohn had already commented on the excessive use of the *Dialogues* in her forward to *Disjecta*.

which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (103). These statements have been used to support the argument that the aesthetic telos of Beckett’s own work is some sort of failure, whether the failure of novelistic conventions, of literary form, of knowledge, of the mind-body relation, of life itself, of the referential function of language, or of language’s general expressivity. In the French reception of Beckett, this reading coincides with the author’s first emergence on the literary scene, where review articles by Blanchot and Georges Bataille heralded the work of this unknown Irish writer by praising, for example, the “l’absence d’humanité et [le] caractère informe de Molloy ... Cette absence, seul un flux incontinent du langage aurait la vertu de l’atteindre” (Bataille 132).⁶⁵ Note that Bataille links the formlessness of character directly to the formlessness of the language that describes him.

Major statements in English and German have been made in much the same vein. “Solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence—these are not the givens of Beckett’s characters,” Stanley Cavell writes of *Endgame*, “but their goal, their new heroic undertaking” (156). For Theodore Adorno, famously, “Meaning nothing becomes the only meaning” (252); and in a recent article, Terry Eagleton writes in powerful terms, “Beckett’s art maintains a compact with failure ... Against fascism’s megalomaniac totalities, he pits the fragmentary and unfinished” (“Political Beckett?” 70). In much the same way as the authors quoted here, a great deal of secondary literature tends to read Beckett’s trilogy as an exercise in the successive impoverishment of language and meaning, a straining towards silence, absence, and formlessness—as if to take Beckett quite at his word when he said in the *Times* interview, “At the end of my work there’s nothing but dust—the namable. In the last book—*The Unnamable*—there’s complete disintegration. No ‘I,’ no ‘have,’ no

⁶⁵ Originally published in *Critique* No. 48, May 1951.

‘being.’ No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There’s no way to go on” (Shenker 148). But of course Beckett did go on, producing short prose pieces, radio plays, theater plays (including *Endgame*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Happy Days*), television plays, four more novels, and a film.

In its attitude toward art and expressivity, it is true the trilogy seems to echo the *Three Dialogues*, which were written in the interval between the trilogy’s second and third books. Molloy, for example, waxes philosophical on the nature of his writing task: “Ne pas vouloir dire, ne pas savoir ce qu’on veut dire, ne pas pouvoir ce qu’on croit qu’on veut dire, et toujours dire ou presque, voilà ce qu’il importe de ne pas perdre de vue, dans la chaleur de la rédaction” (43/28). Since we read Molloy’s comments in the context of his own uncertain narrative about the struggles of self-narration, they necessarily take on a recursive, if not doubly recursive, dimension. Moran makes this clear when he ruminates, “Des histoires, des histoires. Je n’ai pas su les raconter. Je n’aurai pas su raconter celle-ci” (229/137). Is this a narrative about the difficulty of telling stories, or about the difficulty of telling about the difficulty of telling stories? (Repeat question ad infinitum).

Yet to turn toward Beckett’s “gallery of moribunds,” as he calls them, for figures of the failure of language, or of the formlessness of Beckett’s art, would be problematic on at least two counts. On a basic level, any fishing for figures of the failure of language in Beckett’s text would simply be logically contradictory. To argue that Beckett constructs images of impoverishment and failure in order to signify the impoverishment and failure of his own language is to make a case for the successful expression of (the) failure (of expression) in Beckett’s art, a reading that, at the very least, the author explicitly rejects in the context of his *Three Dialogues*. Here, when Beckett suggests the possibility that Bram van Velde’s art is entirely inexpressive, Duthuit asks, “But might it not be suggested ... that the occasion of [van

Velde's] painting is his predicament, and that it is expressive of the impossibility to express?" To which Beckett replies: "No more ingenious method could be devised for restoring him, safe and sound, to the bosom of Saint Luke. But let us for once, be foolish enough not to turn tail" (143). The phrase to "turn tail" might hint at the recursivity involved in turning a failed language into the expression of its own failure—the imperative in Beckett, however, always takes the form of "going on," not doubling back. To be fair, most critics make an effort to avoid the fairly apparent contradiction that this reading entails; but what they end up proposing in its place is that Beckett necessarily fails in his attempt to express failure, a proposition that only places Beckett's "success" at another remove⁶⁶—in other words, if his aesthetic *telos* is failure, and he fails to fail, does he not still fail (that is, succeed)? Or to put it still another way, the real "referent" of Beckett's language is identified here as the authorial intention to fail to express, which is in turn unexpressed (hence expressed) because language continues to be expressive (hence, unexpressive). These readings I find a bit dizzying as well as unsatisfactory; we should be wary of mistaking a structure of oscillation for one of profundity. Ultimately, these readings continue to propose a contradictory pair of assertions: on the one hand, that the expressivity, or meaning, or referential function of language fails in Beckett's work, and on the other hand, that this failure is thematized by means of a figure or set of figures, where it in turn serves as the new referent of Beckett's art.

The second count by which a study of Beckett's "gallery of moribund" metaphors is problematic is perhaps only a more developed version of the first. Any question we pose about the figuration of the form, integrity, or autonomy of Beckett's work by means of the disintegrating identities and failed expeditions we find there—

⁶⁶ See, for example, Jean Yamasaki Toyama: "Beckett proposes to fail to express ... Despite this effort, he will fail to fail to express ..." (15).

that is, by means of the figures that make up his novels' thematic content—begs the very set of questions under consideration, namely the status of the autonomy, integrity and expressivity of Beckett's work and language. For the text that produces images of its own status, that represents itself, comments on itself, and is able to comment on itself, is already understood to be coherent and self-sufficient. It turns to itself as its referent, and perhaps has only its own content to say. The most self-reflexive text is also the most autonomous, an orb enclosed and totally divorced from the world. This is the fantasy of a neat retreat into the interiority of a text, and ultimately the fantasy of language itself as a space of pure interiority.

Moreover, even the secondary literature that does not address the self-reflexivity of Beckett's work per se, but argues instead, or in addition, that Beckett's trilogy "deconstructs" the modern concept of the subject or challenges prevailing notions of subjectivity⁶⁷ runs into a similar problem as long as it deals with the thematic content of Beckett's work, and neglects the problem of reading. That is, the tendency of the literature is to rely on interpretative strategies that continue to lend a referential function to Beckett's figures; for even given the argument that Beckett's work is non-mimetic in the sense that it does not reflect actual situations in the world (itself a debatable issue), we continue to attribute a function of reference to elements of the text when we treat them as metaphors for philosophical concepts. And whether we read these elements as figurations of a critique of the subject, or as figurations of a crisis in the concept of the work, we perpetuate a structure of reflection that merely serves to reterritorialize the very "subject" in question: either we map it on to the philosophico-literary relation, or on to the text as a whole. In the latter case, the work becomes the new subject; for in relying on such interpretative strategies that relate a

⁶⁷ See most recently, for example, Sarah Gendron's "A Cogito for the Dissolved Self: Writing, Presence, and the Subject in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.1 (2004): 47-64.

part of the text to the whole by means of a metaphorical and ultimately totalizing gesture, the reader reconstitutes the text as a space of interiority structured by a very recognizable cognitive operation of self-reflection and synthesis.⁶⁸ When I characterize this operation as “recognizable,” I mean both that it is familiar and that it is itself born from the specular activity of self-recognition in an other in the form of reflection. For it should not be overlooked that self-reflection constitutes the form of the modern subject *par excellence*. In what follows, I will outline the conceptual stakes of reading according to a schema of reflection, and situate these stakes in the context of a romantic literary inheritance.

III.

Ever since Descartes’ “*cogito me cogitare*,” in which the activity of thinking is reflected in a second act that grasps the first as its object, thinking has been characterized as a fundamentally reflexive and reflective operation, and as such has served as the paradigm of subjectivity as well as the cornerstone of certainty on the basis of which knowledge of the world is made possible. With Johann Fichte’s rewriting of Kantian philosophy, the conjunction of reflection and subjectivity reached a kind of apex. Fichte aimed to found his theoretical project of *Wissenschaftslehre*, or “Doctrine of the Science of Knowledge” (published 1794-1795 but revised throughout the philosopher’s life), on the absolute first principle of the freely self-positing “I,” from which a philosophy of the natural world could subsequently be deduced; this is an act of positing that immediately takes the form of a knowledge of itself as self-positing, and as such it constitutes Fichte’s proposal of an originary unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, subject and object, form and content, agent and product of its own action.

⁶⁸ I am following de Man in using the term “metaphor” more generally to describe any figure, including synecdoche, that functions on the basis of a presumed resemblance between its terms. See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 63.

The early German Romantics, and principally Friedrich Schlegel, responded to Fichte in a way that has had major consequences for the Western conception of art and its relation to subjectivity. In “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” (1919), Walter Benjamin argues that whereas for Fichte, the two distinct moments of reflection in the “I”’s self-positing—that is, the positing and the knowledge of that positing—are immediately united in intuition, so that thinking and consciousness of that thinking are indivisible from the outset, and an infinite regress of reflection is in this way avoided, Schlegel, on the other hand, attempted to hold on to both an immediacy of intuition and an infinity in reflection. It was precisely the Romantics’ “cult of the infinite,” as Benjamin calls it, that “divided them from Fichte and lent their thinking its most peculiar and characteristic direction” (126). For Fichte, in short, reflexivity constituted the content of subjectivity; for the Romantics, on the other hand, reflexivity constituted the form of thought, a kind of ceaseless becoming-form of content, and at its limit, a becoming-cognitive of being. Here thinking becomes a thinking of thinking, which in turn becomes a thinking of thinking of thinking. But at this third (and every subsequent) level lies the Romantics’ originality, as Benjamin explains:

The thinking of thinking of thinking can be conceived and performed in two ways. If one starts from the expression “thinking of thinking,” then on the third level this is either the object thought of, thinking (of the thinking of thinking), or else the thinking subject (thinking of thinking) of thinking. The rigorous original form of second-level reflection is assailed and shaken by the ambiguity in third-level reflection. (129)

Third-level reflection, in other words, witnesses the becoming-object of the subject of reflection and a becoming-subject of the object, such that thought confronts a

“disintegration of original form” and a “peculiar ambiguity.” This ambiguity of the subject and object of reflection is multiplied in an infinity of “connectedness,” in Benjamin’s term: an infinite connectedness of multiple centers of reflection which together constitute the “medium of the absolute” (126, 132).

If, for Fichte, the activity of reflection is constitutive of subjectivity, for the Romantics reflection is an originary medium, “logically first and primary” (134). In this way we can understand the importance of art for the Romantics: because any object within the absolute is the occasion for the self-thinking of thought, objects are properly understood as determinations of reflection, and in this way, can be said to be thinking themselves. Following Kant’s treatment of aesthetics as a philosophical problem, the work of art becomes a privileged—indeed, the most privileged—determination of reflection, a site where the self-presentation of a process in a determinate form coincides with the occasion for critical reflection in a structure that looks a lot like self-knowledge. The work’s form, in other words, is a self-limitation that becomes the possibility of its internal reflection (156), as well of its external reflection on genre and ultimately on the idea of art as such. This privileging of art, and of literature in particular, is Romanticism’s explicit concern. Schlegel dreamt of a “transcendental poetry,” in which “[i]n all its descriptions poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” (AF 238). Ultimately he heralded a “progressive, universal poetry” that would “reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric,” this poetry alone being “like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age” (AF 116).

Although the Romantic conception of reflection refers to the self-reflexivity of thought rather than to the self-consciousness of an “I,” it is clear that this conception succeeds nevertheless in mapping on to the work of art, and ultimately on to the world,

the same enlightenment image of subjectivity, only construed along more expansive lines. What it secures once again is an image of thought in which thought's constitutive essence is both its coincidence with itself and its grasping of that coincidence—and as such, a “self” of thought emerges, even if this is no more than the pure form of consciousness grasping itself as self-consciousness. But this pure form or function in turn becomes substantial, in a typically Romantic inversion, once it is made to serve as the content of reflection for the self-thinking absolute.⁶⁹ Ultimately, while the absolute Self as self-consciousness is affirmed “dans l'ombre ou le sillage de Fichte,” as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, the artwork is affirmed as the corollary of this Self, as well as the privileged site of its production (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 48).

Now let us bring this story of reflection back to Beckett's trilogy, and to what I criticized earlier as a way of reading by means of schemas of reflection. Specifically, I took issue with an approach to Beckett's work that would treat it as an allegorical critique of the notion of the subject, in the service of an aesthetics of failure. What such a reading should not neglect to take into account is that this very notion of allegory⁷⁰ relies on a mechanism of reflection that reproduces the formal structure constitutive of the very subject in question. In other words, what Beckett's text is supposed to critique at the level of its content is reinstated at the level of form. And the same can be said for readings that would mine the trilogy for figures of the dissolution of the boundaries of the work or of the integrity of the traditional novel: such arguments rely, paradoxically, on the integrity of the work's ability to reflect on itself by means of its figures, thus reproducing the very concept under consideration

⁶⁹ Benjamin, for example, writes that “mere thinking” becomes “matter” for reflective thinking (Benjamin 127).

⁷⁰ Following Cicero and Quintilian, I mean allegory here in the general sense of “extended metaphor.”

(the work's integrity) in the form of the investigation (the work's self-reflection). Bringing this paradox to the fore by looking explicitly for something like a "representation of unrepresentability" in Beckett's trilogy (perhaps another version of the "aesthetics of failure" approach)—indeed, making such a paradox the principle tool by which one would proceed—would be an improvement on a mere disregard for such contradictions, but certainly nothing that we have not already seen in Romanticism. For the Romantic conception of art par excellence is that of form as constitutive paradox, or to echo Benjamin, form as "disintegration of form," and "peculiar ambiguity." This ambiguity is precisely what in the work (and "out" of the work, for Romantic reflection upsets the boundary between inside and outside) trembles between representation and unrepresentability, form and freedom, object and idea—what already belongs to the work as the seeds of its own "désœuvrement," as Blanchot calls it.

If we hope to exit from the abyssal nature of this problem of reflection, we have to turn to another way of reading, one that would suspend the question of what Beckett's text says about itself by means of its figures, in favor of an examination of the *way* it has of saying and the means by which it constructs these figures. In other words, we need to leave behind the question "what does it say?", or "what does it mean?"—which will always drag us back, one way or another, into the specular formula "I = I"—in favor of the question "how does it work?"⁷¹ That is, we need to turn to an examination of how the trilogy's auto-allegorizing dimension is produced.

IV.

Molloy, *Malone meurt*, and *L'Innommable* not only witness a full-fledged shift in Beckett's writing to first-person narration, but mark the emergence of an explicit

⁷¹ C.f. Gilles Deleuze's remarks on Proust: "L'oeuvre d'art moderne n'a pas de problème de sens, elle n'a qu'un problème d'usage" (*Proust et les signes* 176).

thematization of the act of narration, unprecedented in Beckett's earlier works. As I mentioned above, all of the narrators of the trilogy are writers or storytellers in one way or another, under obligation to blacken pages with text or to fill the silence with a series of stories. This thematization is brought to the fore and managed by Beckett's narrators, who overlay their abject tales with a kind of neurotic and nearly constant, self-disparaging meta-commentary, which functions in tension with or in direct opposition to its embedding discourse. Molloy, for example, punctuates his descriptions with remarks of self-approval, disapproval, or doubt: "C'était sur une route d'une nudité frappante, ... J'invente peut-être un peu, j'embellis peut-être ... [Les vaches] mâchent, puis avalent, puis après une courte pause appellent sans effort la prochaine bouchée ... Mais c'est peut-être là des souvenirs" (10/8); of self-erasure: "un poméranien je crois, mais je ne crois pas" (15/11); and self-revision: "Je me mis à genoux, non, ça ne va pas, je me mis debout" (45/29)—all of which works to foreground the precariousness of the act of writing and to lend a sentiment of uncertainty, even defectiveness, to the resulting narrative. Malone, likewise, interrupts his stories with evaluations of his own writing process: "Quel ennui" (23/189), he protests, "Quelle misère" (27/191); later, "Ça avance" (31/193), or "Non, je ne peux pas ... je ne peux pas" (35/196). In *L'Innommable*, the alternation of discourses increases in speed until this alternation constitutes the very fabric of the narrative, which proceeds much as it begins: "J'ai l'air de parler, ce n'est pas moi, de moi, ce n'est pas de moi" (7/291).

The denial and doubt of the meta-remarks, the repetition of evaluations like "quel ennui" and "quelle misère" to the point of their seeming inevitability, plays what is probably the largest role in the temptation to read Beckett's work in terms of an aesthetics of failure. One of the peculiarities of the trilogy, as Bruno Clément points out at the start of *L'oeuvre sans qualités: Rhétorique de Samuel Beckett* (1994),

outlining an approach to Beckett to which my own reading is much indebted, is “de proposer à la fois une fiction et un discours sur cette fiction, ou plutôt d’imposer subrepticement l’idée qu’elle contient, l’une dépendant de l’autre, ces deux instances” (24). What we must not lose sight of, however, is that both this fiction and the discourse on this fiction issue from one and the same work, and both are equally constitutive of its fictional universe. Furthermore, what Clément describes as a certain uniformity of the critical literature and a lack of detachment in its approach to its object (referring to Beckett’s French reception, although his remarks are pertinent to the English context as well), stems from critics’ taking up and perpetuating a particular meta-discourse of failure and of the inadequacy of language—and, I might add, a particular pathos—that is already contained in the text. But if two discourses are equally comprehended in and equally constitutive of Beckett’s fiction, whence the privileging of the metadiscourse as a source of truth? As an instance of reflection, its formal status as “meta” is enough to grant it a superiority of insight where its object is supposed to be blind; and its location within the work establishes it as a privileged point of reflection on the very aesthetic process that gives rise to it. In the grips of this formal reflection, conversely and paradoxically, the aesthetic process appears all the more uncertain; in the reflective knowledge that metadiscourse purports to bear, the constructive process appears all the more immediate and unreflective.

I am not suggesting that critics have naively confused the biographical author with his narrators, or his actual work with the narratives and statements presented therein. I am suggesting, however, that there is a very strong tendency to assume that the tasks and struggles of the one are analogous to or representative of the tasks and struggles of the other, given the likeness of their activities. In one of the first full-length studies of Beckett’s work, for example, Hugh Kenner comments obliquely on what he knew of Beckett’s depression and solitude while writing the trilogy, making

an obvious connection between the author and his writer-characters, speaking on Beckett's behalf: "All you can do with your novels is write them, alone in a room, assembling what memories you can of experiences you had before your siege in the room commenced, all the time secretly a little ashamed of the genre you are practicing. How can all these lies be taken seriously, and all this local color?" (Kenner 17-18), he writes with inimitable elegance, yet guided by the assumption that remarks in *L'innommable* such as, "cette voix qui parle, se sachant mensongère" (34/307), refer to Beckett's own experience as a novelist.

Corresponding to the disjunction created between the fictional and metafictional discourses are two distinctly different images of the work. The differentiation of discourses in Beckett's trilogy generates a distance between the work as it is and as it ought to be, between what it actually attains and what it laments as its unattainable project. Two distinct images appear: on the one hand, Beckett's work as defined by an "aesthetics of failure"—that is, thoroughly infused with and governed by its relation to failure, and ultimately by a *telos* of silence and formlessness (which indicates the irremediable absence of an ideal); and on the other hand a second work in the image of that ideal, which has been raised to the level of an unattainable and inexpressible truth. Beckett's work systematically upholds the negative image of an essential truth, or of an ideal work capable of presenting this truth, through what it constructs as its own eternal inability to disclose this truth, exhausting itself instead in rendering this inability sensible.⁷² To this end, Beckett's narrators tend to present their own language as "lying," "blathering," "babbling" or "prattling."⁷³

⁷² This is one of the major theses of Clément's book. See *L'oeuvre sans qualités*, 72-73, 90.

⁷³ Clément may run into trouble, however, when he goes so far as to argue that Beckett only gives the appearance of undermining classical elements of the story, or of the traditional novel, or of notions of genre, while in fact, in figuring their absence, he succeeds in consecrating them absolutely (see Clément 90, 108-9). By this logic, one risks understanding both the most conventional and the most unconventional novel to be upholding convention equally; it would be impossible for Beckett's work, or

What Clément proposes instead is an inquiry into Beckett's rhetoric, which leads him to identify the "essential movement" at the heart of the trilogy (and, he maintains, at the heart of Beckett's entire oeuvre), as the tropological operation of epanorthosis (423). "Epanorthosis," from the Greek roots *epi*, "on," *ana*, "marking a return," and *orthos*, "right" or "correct," is a figure of speech that consists in going back over what one has just asserted, either to add nuance, to weaken or retract, or else to reassert the original statement with greater force (Morier). This figure is often associated with correction (*correctio*); but most notably for our purposes, it is a figure of repetition and differentiation. In other words, it functions as a particular type of jointure between two or more assertions that marks the latter as a repetition of the former while simultaneously differentiating their conceptual content. In Beckett's work, it is important to note that almost no such re-statements are direct contradictions. They involve, rather, a kind of nervous adjusting, adding, displacing, or diminishing. This adjusting, I would argue, which takes place on the plane of syntax, belongs to a wider gesture of repetition, of which both epanorthosis and reflection are but limited types. This is a process that need not entail synthesis in a consciousness, but that seeks only to perpetuate itself in a series of endless displacements. Despite Beckett's claims that there was "no way to go on" after *L'innommable*, it seems that the real problem might have been how to end in the first place—perhaps this is the reason that so many elements of Beckett's work repeat and refer to what came before them.

any other, for that matter, to challenge literary convention in the least as long as any attempt at experimentation were understood merely to be upholding, albeit inversely, the very conventions it purports to challenge. The problem lies once again with a tendency to read Beckett's work according to a schema of reflection. One risks treating experimentation merely as a negative reflection of convention, and grasping the disjunctive discourses in the trilogy as a form of exclusion, opposition, and negation, and hence seeing in them opposing and competing images of the work—on the one hand a failed expression in relation to an ideal that is wholly exterior to it, and on the other a truth whose conditions of inexpressibility are likewise exterior to it.

The particular mechanism of repetition at work in the trilogy, of which epanorthosis is but the rhetorical instance, can be referred to what Gilles Deleuze has usefully termed a “disjunctive synthesis”: this describes an articulation that effects a divorce or disjunction between its terms while simultaneously maintaining and affirming their difference. That is, it holds them together *as* disjunct, referring their difference to no other ground than its own differentiating operation, whereas a dialectical or reflective operation would determine such difference as a negative moment of identity. Simultaneously a synthesis and a splitting, the disjunctive synthesis is the essentially “schizophrenic” operation that Deleuze locates at the origin of two or more heterogeneous series, and thus also describes by the formula “soit ... soit ...” (Deleuze and Guattari 12).⁷⁴

In Beckett, a disjunctive articulation likewise precedes the recuperation of elements into narrative units. Consider again Molloy’s writerly advice: “Ne pas vouloir dire, ne pas savoir ce qu’on veut dire, ne pas pouvoir ce qu’on croit qu’on veut dire, et toujours dire ou presque, voilà ce qu’il importe de ne pas perdre de vue, dans la chaleur de la rédaction” (43/28). Rather than reading this as a claim about the doomed enterprise of expression, we might pause over an iteration of clauses that, while formally repetitive, depict distinct and mutually exclusive states or ideas. The first four clauses describe, for example: not wanting, wanting but not knowing, wanting and knowing but not being able, and doing. A relentless parataxis juxtaposes these distinct logical possibilities. With “toujours dire ou presque,” we encounter the absurd pairing of an absolute with its qualification, a peculiar form of epanorthosis

⁷⁴ This formula refers to what is probably the best-known discussion of the concept of the “disjunctive synthesis” in relation to other syntheses, in Chapter 1 of *L’anti-Oedipe*. Other notable discussions of the concept can be found in *Logique du sens* and in Deleuze’s own reading of Beckett in “L’épuisé.” See *Logique du sens*, especially 203, 337-344; “L’épuisé,” especially 57-61.

that might be called, to borrow the term from Beckett, a figure of “lessness.”⁷⁵ It is tempting to attribute a psychological motive to this figure, so that it becomes for us the expression of Molloy’s need to adjust or soften his claims. But in the contradictory passage from “toujours” to “presque,” might these lines not also reveal the impossibility of passage as such, here figured as the impossibility of relating the infinite to the finite, the absolute to the relative, by any means other than sheer juxtaposition? If so, it would be in keeping with the formal parataxis that characterizes this passage. The joke, however, lies in Molloy’s triumphant conclusion: “voilà ce qu’il importe de ne pas perdre de vue.” In other words, the joke of this passage is the ironic claim of the pronoun “ce que” to totalize the series that precedes it. Just *what*, exactly, are we expected to keep in sight?

Ultimately, the lesson of this passage may be one of non-relation and non-totalization. Yet I do not wish to advocate for something like the impossibility of reading Beckett—far from it. The importance of identifying the figure of epanorthosis is that it reveals the mechanism of articulation and organization of contradictory assertions, the ways in which they are meaningfully related, imbued with a pathos, and mobilized under the guise of necessity. That is, this particular figure transports us from the disjunctive iteration of Beckett’s prose to its intelligibility, and it does so by leaning heavily on the pathos that is implied by the act of self-correction. Molloy and other heroes in the trilogy frequently interrupt themselves to comment disparagingly on the nature of linguistic invention, for instance. “Dire c’est inventer,” Molloy

⁷⁵ While this peculiar figure of “lessness” recurs throughout Beckett’s work, perhaps the most definitive example of it can be found in the third stanza of Wordsworth’s “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,” which begins: “She lived unknown, and few could know/ When Lucy ceased to be.” The figure is constructed from the contradictory juxtaposition of an absolute claim (“unknown”) with a relative one (“few could know”), or from the qualification of an unqualifiable term. Although these lines echo the movement from “none” to “few” that occurs in the first stanza of the poem—“A maid whom there were none to praise/ and very few to love,”—the essential irreversibility that characterizes this figure and gives it its paradoxical quality is brought to the fore with the repetition of “known”/“unknown.” See Wordsworth, *Selected Poetry* 147.

proposes, then continues doubtfully, “Faux comme de juste. On n’invente rien, on croit inventer, s’échapper, on ne fait que balbutier sa leçon, des bribes d’un pensum appris et oublié” (49-50/32). Molloy measures speaking against creation, then relegates it to some other status, the failed recitation of a child’s lesson. Referring to a “pensum,” or schoolwork imposed as punishment, he evokes the image of the chastised pupil (has the pupil been punished, paradoxically, for confusing his lesson with his pensum?),⁷⁶ surreptitiously drawing on the humility and shame that such an image implies. Molloy’s contradictory assertions can not only be organized into two disparate discourses, so that one appears to be fictional, the other as metafictional; but the very disparity between these discourses is covered over by means of distressingly familiar emotions, which invite the reader to participate in the emotions of the text. As I suggested above, we can take stock of the production of these emotions when we shift from the question “what does the text mean?” to “how does it work?”

The disjunction between discourses in the trilogy, in sum, not only foregrounds the act of writing, but works to imbue it with pathos. Emotions, as Rei Terada suggests, tend to “mitigate epistemological uncertainties”: on one level they work rhetorically as “blind metaphorizations,” organizing exchanges between two distinct properties or states of being; on a second level, they function as synthetic forces that displace and disguise the discrepancies that emerge in such exchanges, filling an absence of identity with their presence (Terada 29). Following this understanding, I would venture that the disjunction of discourses in Beckett’s work gives rise to two emotions: shame, first of all, which organizes the differential relation between the discourses as one of the inadequacy or failure of the first in the face of the projected standards of the second; and guilt, secondly, which works to synthesize the experience of inadequacy by making it into a kind of a priori truth or existential condition. Franz

⁷⁶ Just as the narrator of *L’innommable* admits, “j’ai confondu pensum et leçon” (39).

Kafka has perhaps gone further than any modern author in diagnosing the nature of this existential guilt; in Beckett this takes the form of the one who is born “headforemost mewling in the charnel-house” (*Malone meurt* 84/225), given “birth to into death” (183/283). The collapsed temporality of a death coincident with life is the figure of an ordinary guilt, a failure that has become the ground of existence. Finally, we might call pathos, in the classical sense, any language that enacts an identificatory exchange between the reader and the imagined figure of the author through the shared emotion generated by the work.

Whereas Deleuze draws on a Kantian terminology to speak of a logical synthesis (even if this is the logic of schizophrenia), my interest lies in the ability of a rhetorical terminology to bring to light the synthesizing function of Beckett’s figures, and the way they organize our reading by coding the terms they articulate, particularly by mobilizing pathos. Where Deleuze identifies a “disjunctive synthesis” that gives rise to two or more heterogeneous series, we can put this notion to work for literary criticism, identifying a rhetorical operation that gives rise to the heterogeneous discourses of Beckett’s novels: a discourse of assertion on the one hand, and of censure, correction, and depreciation on the other. Both, it should be emphasized, are equally constitutive of the language of the text. Epanorthosis is constructed from a complex of assertions whose most adequate expression lies in the movement created between its two poles, or two discourses, a movement of which both of these poles are equally constitutive (Clément 423). And the importance of the rhetorical reading is that it takes both discourses, or both images of the text, together in their contradictory, differentiating, and essentially productive movement. Consider the often-quoted terminal lines of the trilogy: “il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer” (213/414). Does the narrative thread, in fact, not pass through a series of different assertions: one in the form of an unquestioning obligation, the second which

addresses the first with an attitude of revisionary complaint, and the third which speaks in an attitude of stoic compromise, which in turn might become the primary assertion for a subsequent operation? No self-reflection here, but self-differentiation in repetition. No self-effacement, but the endless generation and displacement of an obligation coded as “originary.” For the brief remainder of this chapter, I would like to take a closer look at the content of this originary assertion.

Hegel faulted Kant and Fichte for being unable to synthesize the reflective opposition of subject and object, self and other, in an Absolute that would comprehend them both. His critique of reflection, in other words, was carried out in the name of that synthetic Absolute (Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* 22).⁷⁷ Deleuze, on the other hand, as we saw in Chapter Three, not only pursues a disjunctive synthesis that is not recuperated in self-reflection or self-identity, but locates this synthesis within a genuinely transcendental inquiry. This inquiry may be the driving force of Deleuze’s work, whether he is dealing with practical or theoretical objects, and can be roughly formulated as follows: given diversity, or a set of differences in the world, what is the mechanism that accounts for their differentiation, prior to their relation being determined as one of self and other, subject and object, form and content, or affirmation and negation?⁷⁸ Such an inquiry posits an alternative to schemas of reflection, and enables us to examine and classify different sorts of relations without arranging them in a dialectic of opposition, reflection, and sublation.

In Beckett’s trilogy, epanorthosis names the mechanism or function that differentiates and organizes the difference between discourses. But this difference is

⁷⁷ See also chapters 1 and 2 of *The Tain of the Mirror*.

⁷⁸ In *Mille plateaux*, for example, Deleuze and Guattari turn to Hjelmslev for his treatment of both content and expression as “fonctifs d’une même fonction” (60). The same citation of Hjelmslev appears at a crucial moment in *L’image-temps* (Chpt. 4, n. 3).

in turn motivated by something else, as I have already mentioned: this is the thematization of the act of writing, Beckett's bringing of writing into writing, his making the story of writing both form and content. Paradoxically, the very gesture that would ground the necessity of the theme of writing in the work's self-reflection also exposes its contingency, arbitrariness, or irrelevance, as *mere* reflection. That is, if Beckett's theme, "writing," appears to be a necessary one insofar as it reflects the act of writing that conditions it, this act in turn recovers its contingency in being beholden to its reflection in art, unable to give form to anything *but* its own reflection. This precarious situation recalls Foucault's description, in *La pensée du dehors*, of the "solitary sovereignty" of self-referential language, where such language becomes like an "impenetrable fortress" of self-declaration, one in which subject and object align neatly and absolutely (10/147). Yet this very "fortress" of self-reference, which "ne loge sa souveraineté que dans l'absence de tout autre langage" (148/11), raises the question of the void that would have to surround it. Accomplished in this void, nothing can limit it—neither its addressee in the world, nor the truths, values, or representations on which it may draw (*ibid*).

V.

Beckett's work offers a series of brilliant solutions to the problem of its own contingency. Since the *Three Dialogues*, when Beckett wrote of "the expression that there is ... no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Proust* 103), much as been made of this failure of expression, but much less of the obligation to express, with which this failure finds itself oddly and inexplicably paired. The terms "odd" and "inexplicable," in fact, aptly describe the way necessity is figured in the trilogy. For as many instances as there are of unaccomplished tasks, deteriorating bodies, and broken bicycles, we find a corresponding number of figures of compulsion and obligation, all the more convincing given the physical and mental

desperation of most of Beckett's scenarios and characters. Again, it is the apparent impossibility of their "going on" that creates a heightened sense of their actual accomplishments, which emerge *quand même* from the narrow straits of disability and ignorance. Perhaps the most paradigmatic examples of Beckett's figures of necessity are the messenger-agents Gaber and Youdi.

Gaber first appears to Moran in a typically Beckettian description that leaps from the obscure to the overly-precise, as if perception were a matter of logical inference that somehow confused rather than clarified comprehension of the whole. "Un homme entra dans le jardin et s'avança vivement vers moi," Moran observes, and then adds as if surmising, "Je le connaissais bien" (155/93). The man, or "cette longue figure qui fonçait droit sur moi," is dressed in black and crushing daisies with his enormous feet; the cataclysmic event—the orders to go and "see about Molloy"—in which Moran says "s'écoulèrent mes derniers moments de bonheur et de calme" (ibid.) is only mitigated by the thought that Gaber himself "ne faisait que son métier d'intermédiaire" (156/94). Youdi, it turns out, is the chief, though invisible, orchestrator of the operation. His messages are transmitted through Gaber by means of an incomprehensible code, of whose contents Gaber is completely ignorant and abysmally forgetful ("incapable de les retenir pendant plus de quelques secondes"), yet eager to speculate wildly all the same, "en tir[ant] des conclusions d'une fausseté stupéfiante" (177/107). Moreover, the contents are assuredly partial, Moran supposing Youdi to reveal only "ce qu'il jugeait utile pour la bonne et rapide exécution de ses ordres," and further, to possess the particular talent of changing his mind, and his orders, "avec une assez grande facilité" (191-92/115). Though he has never met his boss, nor any messenger other than Gaber, nor agent other than himself, and though the reader is made to wonder if these personalities can even be seen by other people (Moran's maid seems to have no memory of Gaber), Moran fancies himself part of a

vast network. The feeling of being one of a kind, is, after all, too much for him to bear (178/107). Despite these and other prohibitive uncertainties, Moran is resigned to wander in the wilderness on the strength of these orders, at the great expense of his health, property, and family, in pursuit of an object he admits is potentially imaginary (Molloy).

The absurdity of this situation highlights the arbitrary nature of the authority that pushes Beckett's characters to action. This is consistently a vague but absolute authority that appears spontaneously as if from a void, delivering a scrambled message; its origin may be shrouded in confusion, to the point of doubt being cast on the very externality of the command (is Gaber a figment of Moran's imagination? Is Molloy?); but the form of the obligation remains indisputable. This is the obligation that sets Molloy off on a perilous quest to his mother's: though their contents remain undisclosed, Molloy says he encounters "des raisons présentant un caractère d'urgence ... jusqu'à ce que toute autre préoccupation en fût bannie, et que je me prisse à frémir à la seule idée que je pourrais être empêché de m'y rendre ... séance tenante" (22/15). He thinks himself a puppet, and suspects someone else of controlling the strings (54/88). Inexplicable and anonymous authorities appear later in the form of a "they" who demand pages from Molloy in exchange for money, and as police agents who demand from him, in a remarkably parallel situation, names (Molloy's and his mother's), and papers ("Or les seuls papiers que je porte sur moi," Molloy confides comfortably, "c'est un peu de papier journal, pour m'essuyer, vous comprenez, quand je vais à la garde-robe" (30/20)).

In *L'innommable*, too, forces of authority and obligation are figured in the most striking fashion. Beckett's narrator begins by stating that he is obliged to speak, and that he will have to speak of things of which he cannot speak (8/291); he seems to be a cipher for a language that originates elsewhere, a ventriloquist's dummy. Like a

schoolboy, he is compelled to speak for a master or a whole gang of masters—“tout un consortium de tyrans,” he calls them (40/310), as if his speech were a pensum to be recited in front of the class. “Entre moi et le droit au silence, le repos vivant, s’étend la même leçon que toujours” (32/306), he writes; “j’ai un pensum à faire, avant d’être libre” (39/310). Who speaks here, I am tempted to ask, returning to our original question, and who is at the mercy of language? At times these masters seem to control the narrative; the narrator says that Mahood’s voice “continuait à témoigner pour lui, comme tissée dans la mienne.” Further: “[C]’est lui qui me racontait des histoires sur moi, vivait pour moi, sortait de moi, revenait ver moi, rentrait dans moi, m’agonissait d’histories... C’est sa voix qui s’est souvent mêlée à la mienne, au point quelquefois de la couvrir tout à fait” (37/309).

At other moments Mahood and Basil are said to be products of the narrative itself:

Et Basile et consorts? Inexistants, inventés pour expliquer je ne sais plus quoi. Ah oui. Mensonges que tout ça. Dieu et les hommes, le jour et la nature, les élans du coeur et le moyen de comprendre, lâchement je les ai inventés, sans l’aide de personne, puisqu’il n’y a personne, pour retarder l’heure de parler de moi. (29/304)

Strange moment here, when cowardice and failure become indistinguishable from the most extreme arrogance, in which the narrator claims to have invented God, nature, and man.

When I wrote earlier that *Malone meurt* offers a temporary solution to the problem of continuity in *Molloy* by relocating the narrative in Malone’s mind, I suggested that this solution is repeated in *L’innommable*, where the unnamed narrator in turn claims authorship of Molloy, Moran, and Malone, as well as characters from other of Beckett’s novels. But the site of synthesis that *L’innommable* would offer is rapidly confounded in a confusion of activity and passivity, and a collapse of all

distance between creator and created in language. “Si je parle d’une tête, a propos de moi, c’est que j’en entends parler” (111/353), the narrator notes; elsewhere, “I still the teller and the told” (310). He claims to be alone but for the company of “a few puppets”; he is seated, unmoving, while his character Malone orbits around him like a planet around its sun—or better yet (the narrator revises his metaphor), like a moon around a planet that may itself be in orbit: “Impassible, immobile, muet, soutenant sa mâchoire, Malone tourne, étranger pour toujours à mes faiblesses ... J’ai beau ne pas bouger, c’est lui le dieu ... Moi seul suis homme et tout le reste divin” (22/300). Who is this stellar “I,” subject to his creations? Puppet, or puppet master? Speaking, or spoken through? The gamut of images that represent the narrator’s linguistic task is unforgettable: he is alternately a pupil, a parrot, a worm squirming on a hook. Words issue from his body with the automatism of a physical process: he groans, belches, spits, shits, vomits, oozes pus from his windpipe, and cries unceasingly—“la cervelle liquéfiée” he suggests (11/292). What does this compulsion to speak, and especially this figuration of language and thought by means of a medley of bodily fluids, tell us about Beckett’s trilogy?

“Qu’un jour il me poussera sur la trachée un beau petit abcès avec une idée dedans, point de départ d’une infection généralisée. ... Et je ne serais bientôt plus qu’un réseau de fistules charriant le pus bienfaisant de la raison” (111/353). Here speaking no longer originates in thought; rather, thought, already diseased, issues from the automatism of speech. This reversal may also explain the logic of inference that governs perception in the trilogy. In addition, consider the beginning of *L’innommable*, when Beckett writes “J’ai l’air de parler. Ce n’est pas moi” (7/291),⁷⁹ as if to replace Descartes’ “*videre videor*,” or “I seem to see,” the self-perception at

⁷⁹ “I seem to speak. It is not I.”

the foundation of the thinking self, with the assertion of a speech prior to, or precluding, both thought and self, and certainly thought as self-thinking.⁸⁰ With the abscess in the windpipe oozing the “pus of reason,” Beckett makes speaking issue not from the interiority of thought, but from the exteriority of the body—while the body, in turn, becomes merely a passive and permeable site of intervention by a series of external and disintegrating forces. These forces may appear as infection to Worm, as the compulsion to speak to Mahood or Mahood’s narrator, as a slow demise to Malone, as messenger-agents to Moran, even as Lousse to Molloy (like Circe, she attempts to divert the hero from his quest with a “slow poison”). What are all three of Beckett’s narratives, after all, but stories of the body confronted with a series of destructive encounters, and especially encounters with obligation? Beyond the body that speaks there is the obligation to go on speaking.

We may readily suspect that the obligation that compels Beckett’s characters issues from the author himself, controlling events as if with an unseen hand. At times characters seem to be dimly aware of their contingent status, like cartoon figures who fear the intrusion of a giant eraser-topped pencil into the frame, resigned to accept intervention from their animator. Appropriately, Mahood’s sky is described as “un crayon d’ardoise” (*L’Innommable* 97/345), Malone’s as “un ciel d’encre” (*Malone meurt* 26/190). As Mahood, the narrator finds himself lacking a leg, then halfway through the story, an arm as well, as if these details emerged *ex post facto* from the narrative, rather than from the priority of an authorial decision: “Mahood laissa tomber comme incidemment qu’il me manquait non seulement une jambe, mais un bras aussi” (58/321). We seem to be witnessing the very emergence of fictional characters from

⁸⁰ “At certe videre videor, audire, calescere. Hoc falsum esse non potest; hoc est proprie quod in me sentire appellatur; atque hoc praecise sic sumptum nihil aliud est quàm cogitare.” [At all events it is certain that I seem to see light, hear a noise, and feel heat; this cannot be false, and this is what in me is properly called perceiving (sentire), which is nothing else than thinking]. (Descartes II §9).

the narrator's speech, which continues uninterrupted like the seminal ooze of so many pre-individual organisms: "Les histoires de Mahood sont terminées, il a compris qu'elles ne pouvaient être à mon sujet ... On me lancera peut-être encore, ceint de meilleures armes,⁸¹ à l'assaut de la mortalité ... Maintenant je m'entends dire que c'est la voix de Worm qui commence, je transmets la nouvelle, pour ce qu'elle vaut" (97-98/345). Later:

[C]e sera fini, cet enfer d'histoires ... ils sauront ce que c'est que d'être un sujet de conversation, je leur prêterai des propos qu'on ne donnerait pas à un chien, une oreille, une bouche, avec quelques débris d'entendement au milieu, je me vengerai, quelques crottes d'entendement, ils verront ce que c'est, je leur foutrai un oeil quelque part dans le tas, comme ça, au jugé, des fois qu'il pourrait s'égarer quelque chose devant, je m'assiérai dessus et je leur chierai des histoires. ... Naissez, chers amis, naissez ... (155/380)

Passages like these appear to expose the very genesis of the creative process—and this feeling infects the rest of the trilogy. Retrospectively, even *Molloy*, which of the three books has the least explicitly to do with writing, appears to break down at points in order to reveal the scaffolding of a metafictional situation: Molloy writes without knowing "half the words" because, the reader supposes, the author supplies him with text, and he follows an inarticulate impulse to go to his mother's because the author sets him on this quest. And with bits of newspaper underneath his greatcoat, we might say Molloy is literally dressed in words.

In sum, it seems as if the reader were privy to both the content of the fiction and the process of its production. A ready way of accounting for the variety of

⁸¹ in English, "girt with better arms" refers literally to the fact that the narrator's previous two incarnations were missing one or both arms.

mysterious obligations that appear in the trilogy would thus be to assume that characters are compelled by virtue of their being characters; thus their narratives become allegories for the metafictional situation of the author at his writing desk. Indeed, it is a dominant motif in Beckett criticism to insist that Beckett's art is, above all, an art about making art.

However, as I suggested earlier, the identification of Beckett the author with the predicament of his writer-characters is just as carefully orchestrated by the text as this feeling of the text's being drafted, uncertainly, before our very eyes. The repeatedly thematized confusion of activity and passivity in the trilogy, which comes to a head (and just so, fails to be located in any "head") in *L'innommable*, reveals a more precise exchange that is in fact operative throughout: namely, by means of a metaphorical identification of the author or figure of the author with his characters through the similarity of their expressive vocation, an exchange ensues involving the positions of activity and passivity vis à vis the production of the language of the actual text at hand. What the author-figure inherits is precisely those qualities of passivity, contingency, and non-knowledge that belong so visibly to his characters. And despite appearances to the contrary, such an inheritance is decidedly to the writer's advantage, for it successfully relocates the necessity of textual production to an irremediable outside. In other words, what the author inherits, obliquely, is the externality of the obligation to express. This is the reason that Beckett populates the narratives of the trilogy with obscure figures of authority who generate obligations, debts, and commands: what is at stake is precisely a representation of necessity as an absolute beyond, a necessity whose origins are unknowable and whose dictates preclude choice. Of course, such a figuring of necessity obscures the great precision and mastery of Beckett's willfully undertaken artistic labor.

On the one hand, then, we have an identification of the author with his

characters on the basis of a common activity of writing, and on the other hand, we have a swapping of active and passive roles such that the author appears to be subject to the will of his creations (“[C]’est lui le dieu... Moi seul suis homme et tout le reste divin”). What I referred to as a “confusion” of activity and passivity is in fact the perpetual and self-perpetuating circularity of the logic of this metaphor, which tends in the first two books to form larger circuits of exchange, and in the third book to form very compact circuits or oscillations, so that several become possible in a single sentence, and by the end of the book have even rearranged the rhythm of what counts as a sentence. The pivot of this active-passive exchange is none other than the text itself, which appears to compel both author and character under the guise of a pure auto-necessity.

This argument about the auto-necessity of the text can be stated in other terms. In the universe of the trilogy, writing appears to originate from a state of non-knowledge (Molloy has “forgotten how to spell, and half the words”; Moran’s “report” will presumably contain no knowledge of its object, Molloy), and physical helplessness (Molloy has taken the place of his aged mother, Moran has degenerated, Malone lies in an institutional home) either at the end of one’s life, or following a period of great travail, and certainly under the threat of the impossibility of continuing. In the first book, writing is done at the behest of unseen caregivers in exchange for sustenance; in the second book, writing becomes co-terminus with the time of life, where it seems to be either an attempt to stave off death or more simply a means of occupying the remaining hours. In *L’innommable*, all of these characterizations of language reemerge at various points in the narrative, but the relation of language to death is even more prominent. With the disembodiment of the unnamed narrator, and the removal of writing as a material support for language, speech becomes both the only material and the only sign of life, or, we might say, life itself; speech becomes the

only medium, while death in turn is made to belong wholly to speech, co-terminus with that speech's end. Death, in other words, can paradoxically appear only at the end of language and is therefore unreachable in the medium of the work itself. While Beckett's rhetorical maneuver is to attribute the necessity of his writing to an irremediable outside, he also systematically transforms this outside, through the course of the trilogy, into the absolute outside of language. The result, or rather the only recourse Beckett has left, is a figuration of the language of the text as a pure auto-compelling.

With the auto-compelling or auto-necessity of the text, we return less to Fichte's self-positing self-consciousness ("I = I") than to Foucault's "I speak" as the exemplary form of language's "solitary sovereignty," asserting itself in the void of definitive reference. Yet the sovereignty of language is replaced with the refusal of self-identity, and the displacement of an obligation that is attributed to an obscure and external origin. Moreover, we must remember that the necessity of the text as I describe it above is still merely an image or figure of the work that the work, by means of its internal mechanisms, takes its pains to construct. Though perhaps this is not merely an image among other possible images, but the privileged image of modern art as such, insofar as, from the moment that the concept of the aesthetic, and especially the concept of literature, emerged to designate an autonomous sphere of production, the very question of art's autonomy was bequeathed to the individual artwork as the problem most proper to it.

Despite appearances to the contrary, then, Beckett's work is not governed by an aesthetics of failure, or a critique of the subject, or an undoing of the traditional integrity of the novel. Rather, his aesthetics—and by aesthetics I mean the image that makes the text cohere, its formal cause or principle—is one of absolute and unassailable necessity. Despite the deliberate impoverishment of its content and the

self-deprecation of the narrative voice, it is a formidable monolith confronting the utter vacuity of its own contingency, as formidable and formed, and in this way operating in much the same way as, as any masterwork of the past. But the mechanism that makes it work is an entirely different question: this is the fissure internal to the work, the generative movement of division and differentiation.

CHAPTER FIVE

HYPERBOLE IN PROUST

C'est pourquoi la meilleure part de notre mémoire est hors de nous, dans un souffle pluvieux, dans l'odeur de renfermé d'une chambre ou dans l'odeur d'une première flambée...

—A la recherche du temps perdu, 511

Il ne faut pas avoir peur d'aller trop loin, car la vérité est au-delà.

—Proust, letter to E. R. Curtius

Hyperbole abounds in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, to the extent that it seems to be the rule of metaphoric production rather than the exception. Whether Proust's narrator is comparing an episode from his childhood to a world-historical event, or transported by emotions that seem to exceed their provocations, and led to employ a superabundant number of images or quantity of discourse, the generative principle of the narrative seems to be one of excess in one form or another. From the cup of tea that opens onto the whole of Combray, to the uneven paving stones that provoke in the narrator an indifference to death, even involuntary memory takes the form of a projection and a traversal of boundaries, perhaps even of an exaggerated claim.

Hyperbole, from *hyper*, “over” and *bollein*, “to throw” is defined by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* as “a manner of speech exaggerating the truth, whether for the sake of magnifying or minifying something” (341).⁸² The Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus gives prominent place to this figure in his manual *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style* (1512), which instructed students in a variety of means of amplifying their writing, and which suggests to us that there might be a

⁸² My understanding of hyperbole is indebted to a recent article by Goran Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truth: On Hyperbole in English Renaissance Literature.”

connection between figures of exaggeration and verbal abundance in general. If we were to investigate the meaning and purpose of hyperbole in Proust's novel, we would still have to confront the difficult task of selecting a few exemplary passages from an ocean of narrative, and moreover, of generalizing on the basis of these passages, a gesture that would itself no doubt be hyperbolic to some degree.⁸³ Nevertheless, if reading Proust is the best instruction in reading Proust, we would do well to examine two key passages from the earlier volumes of the *Recherche* in the hope that they will elucidate other patterns of meaning in the novel. In the end I will show how hyperbole in these passages helps to describe the organization of the Proustian self with respect to its sense impressions, as well as the conversion of the self into an intelligible work of art.

I.

The young narrator's description of the steeples of Martinville is not the first act of writing represented in the novel—this would be his note to his mother, begging her to come upstairs to his bedroom in Combray⁸⁴—but it is the first and only attempt at literary writing represented. I turn to this passage in part because of the exemplary status the narrative grants it, both as a key moment in the narrator's discovery of his vocation to write, and as the presentation of a fragment of writing that seems, at least at first, to be displayed for its literary merits. In other words, I turn to it initially wondering whether its exemplary status might not be overstated. In the very least, the passage has an excessive quality about it for the simple reason that the description of the steeples is essentially produced for the reader not once but twice.⁸⁵

⁸³ In *Copia*, Erasmus also lists hyperbole among the means by which examples are included in a discourse: "Any illustrative example you choose may be variously incorporated by means of a simile, contrary, comparison, hyperbole, epithet, likeness, metaphor, or allegory" (Erasmus 550).

⁸⁴ C.f. Samuel Weber, "The Madrepore," for a convincing analysis of this scene of writing.

⁸⁵ In fact, Proust's description of the steeples appears for a reading public no less than four times: first in the November 19, 1907 issue of *Le Figaro* in the form of an article entitled "Impressions de route en

Like so many singular events in the novel, this episode emerges against a backdrop of habitual action, here the narrator's unhappy reflections on his future failure in a literary career, "un avenir poétique sur lequel mon manque de talent m'interdisait de compter" (147/I 194). A sense impression would often interrupt these thoughts, sunlight on a stone or the smell of a garden path "bien en dehors de toutes ces préoccupations," an impression which seemed to conceal something else yet, "au-delà de l'image ou de l'odeur." The story the narrator tells us about the importance of these impressions is that their real significance lay elsewhere than the scene in which they manifested themselves, a beyond which he underscores with "bien en dehors de" and a repetition of "au-delà." They would offer the narrator "un plaisir irraisonné"—an "irrational" pleasure, but also perhaps an unwarranted one (a pleasure without reason)(148/I 196). On this occasion, the narrator is once again struck by "une impression de ce genre," leading him to "ce plaisir spécial qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre"—"aucun autre" being an overstatement if these impressions are numerous enough to belong to a "genre," and these pleasures repeated often enough to merit the use of the grammatical imperfect, and the exclamation that opens the passage, "Combien depuis ce jour, dans mes promenades..."

On this particular occasion, the narrator's walk being "prolongée fort au-delà de sa durée habituelle" (ibid.), which means that it is later than usual and that he and his parents have to accept a carriage ride home to hasten their return, the narrator is struck by the sight of church steeples against the sky, and by the apparent movement of the steeples as he speeds towards and then away from them in the carriage. Even the content of his impression has an element of surfeit to it, as the sight of the twin steeples of Martinville-le-Sec is enhanced by that of a third steeple, Vieuxvicq, "qui,

automobile," which Yves Tadié celebrates as "an embryo of his future work," then in *Du côté de chez Swann*, where it is doubled, as I suggested, by the narrative, and finally in *Pastiches et mélanges* (1919), a collection of occasional pieces (Tadié 498; cited in Danus 101).

séparée d'eux par une colline et une vallée, et situé sur un plateau plus élevé dans le lointain, semblait pourtant tout voisin d'eux" (148/I 196). Not only the distance but the elevation of Vieuxvicq heightens the thrill of the illusion that places the steeples side by side; interestingly enough, in the fragment of writing the narrator produces, this apparent proximity is revised as an identity, so that the three towers end up merging completely, becoming at a great distance "qu'une seule forme noire" (150/I 197). (see Appendix for the full text of the fragment).

If the narrator's claims about the importance of his experience or the worth of his writing are hyperbolic, then we might say that in this scene, form imitates content: the exaggerated speech imitates the distance described between a sense impression and its supposed significance, and works to convey the emotion of traversing this distance. Furthermore, a case can be made for reading the content of the narrator's vision as a sort of allegory of hyperbole. The drama of the narrator's perception derives from the tension between the distance of the third steeple and the trick of perception that would bring it near the other two, not unlike the drama of a hyperbolic claim, which unfolds in the distance between itself and what it is supposed to represent, a distance that it both preserves and purports to cover over.

The narrator is initially struck, moreover, by the vertical projection of the steeples, "s'élevant du niveau de la plaine et comme perdus en rase campagne, mont[ant] vers le ciel..." (149/I 198), not unlike the way one is struck by a figure of speech that stands out from ordinary language, or draws attention to itself over and above what it communicates. In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), which contains the most detailed definition of hyperbole of the Renaissance, George Puttenham calls hyperbole not only a "false semblant," along with metaphor and allegory, but a "lowd lyer," underscoring the fact that hyperbole is an untruth whose aim is not to deceive but rather to draw attention to itself. He writes: "now when I speake that which

neither I my selfe thinke to be true, nor would haue any other body beleue, ... I meane nothing lesse then that I speake” (159). If hyperbole means nothing less than the fact that I speak, that is, if, beyond the object of representation, hyperbole is above all concerned with itself as a heightened or self-conscious mode of language, then we might consider it to be a figure whose real referent is figurative language itself—hyperbole as a sort of figure of figures.

There have been other candidates for this position of the “figure of figures,” if for no other reason than that the verbal attempt to describe figurality—that is, the attempt to use language to describe a linguistic effect—unavoidably begs the question of the proper representation of representation (while the means of such representation available to us are historically finite). In “The Turns of Metaphor,” Jonathan Culler cites a long-standing tendency to ascribe an exemplary status to metaphor over other figures; and he argues that a treatment of metaphor as a “figure of figures” will end up foregrounding the referentiality of tropological language, since the claim of metaphor is a claim of authentic representation (metaphors, in this view, set up purportedly referential relationships between concepts and imaginative images) (189-191). By contrast, in “Prosopopeia,” Michael Riffaterre suggests that prosopopeia may be a figure of figural language precisely insofar as prosopopeia can *never* be referential.⁸⁶ Lending a face to a faceless object, he argues, prosopopeia is the very index of fiction and of literariness in general (Riffaterre 110). If we follow Riffaterre’s reasoning, we might assert the same of hyperbole: that in intentionally departing from its object to assert an exaggerated truth, it is nothing less than the index of figurality as such. Or perhaps we ought to consider the possibility that the difference between truth and fiction, or literal and literary language, can only be stated in hyperbolic terms.

⁸⁶ Riffaterre is in turn echoing Paul de Man’s claim that prosopopeia is the “master trope of poetic discourse” (*Resistance to Theory* 48).

The ecstatic page of writing produced by Proust's narrator—ecstatic both in its style and in its relation to the rest of the narrative—is set off from the text with quotation marks, presented to us wholesale, we are told, with “peu de changements” (149/I 198). We are left to wonder what the exact nature and magnitude of these changes might have been: whether nothing has been altered, in fact, and the author exaggerates, or whether the page has actually been substantially revised, and the author downplays his labor, out of pride or for other reasons. The difference between the two texts—the page as we read it and the fictional page that we will never read, but of whose existence we are assured by the narrative—might be infinitely small or infinitely large, but it is ultimately undecidable. It mirrors, of course, the difference between the narrative of *A la recherche du temps perdu* and the great work that the narrator claims to be ready to write by the end of the novel. Many critics have referred to what appears to be the circular structure of Proust's novel,⁸⁷ in which the work alluded to will be the very work we have been reading all along; but, as Joshua Landy has carefully and convincingly demonstrated, there is sufficient evidence in the narrative in fact to preclude the identity of these two texts (36-49).⁸⁸ Even if there were not a shred of evidence to disrupt the supposition of a seamless identity between the two texts, however, we still could not disregard the fact that the existence of the

⁸⁷ Howard Moss, for example, describes the end of the novel: “We have just read, of course, the very work Marcel is about to undertake. Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Remembrance of Things Past* is its own self-sealing device. Circular in structure, its end leads us back to its beginning” (109; qtd. in Landy 178n). Similarly, Roger Shattuck claims, “Marcel and the Narrator move slowly toward one another, until they finally meet in the closing pages. That reunited *I . . .* produces a whole which is the book itself” (38; qtd. in Landy 37).

⁸⁸ Landy largely points to passages in *Le temps retrouvé* where the narrator makes it clear that he has already drafted much of his memoirs, which he frequently calls his “récit,” but that he has yet to begin his novel, which he refers to in the future tense as “mon oeuvre” or “mon livre” (Proust 2389-2397/III 1088-1100); though Landy's claim also includes a carefully worked-out chronology of the narrator's writing life (Landy 39). Even if we imagine that the narrator will transform the very same material of his memoirs into his new novel, and thus we take him at his word when he says, “le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur” (2280-81/III 926), the difference between these two texts remains infinitely unknowable. That is, we will never know the magnitude of the revisions that will take place, which might be infinitely large, infinitely small, or somewhere in between.

future work rests exclusively on what remains a fictional claim. That is, the minimal difference between the texts remains the difference of fiction.

After unloading his impressions onto the page, the narrator begins to sing “à tue-tête,” happy as “une poule [qui] venait de pondre un oeuf” (150/I 197). At the same time, he claims, hyperbolically, “je ne repensai jamais à cette page” (ibid.). “Jamais” ends up being much shorter than we might expect, for we subsequently discover that the narrator has shown what he calls a “prose poem” to his father’s colleague M. de Norpois, a page he composed “autrefois à Combray en revenant d’une promenade,” written “avec une exaltation” that sounds suspiciously like the rapture with which the Martinville page was written (365/I 491). Years later, in *Le côté de Guermantes*, the narrator lets slip in a parenthetical remark that his description of the steeples has been cleaned up for publication, “précisément retrouvée il y avait peu de temps, arrangée, et vainement envoyée au *Figaro* (1053/II 412). *La prisonnière* opens with the narrator regularly checking the paper in morning, eager to see himself in print (1612/III 4-5); he continues to check the paper (1692/III 114); though it is not until *Albertine disparue* that the article finally appears (2032/ III 579). The narrator invites us to share in his surprise by dramatizing his ignorance just prior to opening the paper: “Sans doute y avait-il quelque article d’un écrivain que j’aimais et qui écrivant rarement serait pour moi une surprise,” he writes with implausible ingenuousness (and plausible narcissism). The meaning of the episode, as he finally makes clear in *Le temps retrouvé*, is its contribution to his discovery of his vocation to write, the “invisible vocation” of which the present narrative is but the history (1053/II 412). He writes:

[Q]u’il s’agit d’impressions comme celle que m’avait donnée la vue des clochers de Martinville, ou de réminiscences ... il fallait tâcher d’interpréter les sensations comme les signes d’autant de lois et d’idées,

en essayant de penser, c'est-à-dire de faire sortir de la pénombre ce que j'avais senti, de le convertir en un équivalent spirituel. Or, ce moyen qui me paraissait le seul, qu'était-ce autre chose que faire une oeuvre d'art? (2271/III 912)

The destiny of the steeples, he claims in this passage, is their conversion into a “spiritual equivalent,” and their reappearance in a work of art. We will have more to say on the nature of this work in a moment, and on this theory of the spiritual conversion of sensations. For the present, let us note that the hyperbolic description of the narrator's first encounter with the steeples is matched by a narrative strategy of belated disclosure.

That is, I would suggest that any hyperbolic rhetoric in the narrator's first impressions of the steeples can be understood to echo the position of the episode with respect to the rest of the narrative, and to dramatize the anticipation of the discovery of its significance. Like a great many other events in the novel, the episode's significance is belatedly and progressively revealed; in this case, a series of relays is established, so that each time the narrator recalls the page of writing, he points toward a future moment in which its meaning will be manifest, or at least in which the page will be manifest in print. At the time of the episode, however, the narrator claims not yet to admit to himself what was hidden “behind” the sight of the steeples, though he suggests what it was: “ce qui était caché derrière les clochers de Martinville devait être quelque chose d'analogue à une jolie phrase, puisque c'était sous la forme de mots qui me faisaient plaisir, que cela m'était apparu” (149/I 197).

How, then, are we to read the fragment of writing the narrator produces? In it, the steeples are soldiers lost in battle; they are birds perched on a plain; they are golden pivots, painted flowers, and girls huddled together at dusk. I must admit I find this to be one of the most difficult passages to read in the whole *Recherche*, if only

because I am unable to penetrate the affective relationship the narrator seems to have with his own writing. However attractive I find the individual images to be, in combination they seem gratuitous, and the description is at once excessive and yet too meager to produce the exultation the narrator describes. All of the metaphors, we might note, are products of the optical effects of light and movement; as the narrator makes clear, he is principally struck by the form, line, and surface of the steeples—“la forme de leur flèche, le déplacement de leurs lignes, l’enseillement de leur surface” (148/I 196). Even the comparison of the steeples to painted rather than real flowers emphasizes the flatness of the perception. It seems to be the very superficiality of his impressions that the narrator delights in, and which draws our attention to a superficiality of meaning in the passage, and yet which compels the narrator to believe that something else has to lie below the surface. He insists, “je sentais que je n’allais pas au bout de mon impression, que quelque chose était derrière ce mouvement, derrière cette clarté, quelque chose qu’ils semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois” (ibid.). We might observe that this description and treatment of sense impressions is extremely close to, perhaps even indistinguishable from, a description of figurative language in general, in which tenor relates to vehicle like “cette chose inconnue qui s’enveloppait d’une forme ou d’un parfum... protégée par le revêtement d’images” (148/I 196). Before we proceed any further with our analysis of this passage as a kind of allegory of figurative language, we ought to develop our working understanding of figurality in Proust’s novel, and of hyperbole in particular, by leaping ahead to a second passage.

II.

Hyperbole often contains a metaphorical aspect, and rhetoricians have usually classified the two figures together. Aristotle, for example, wrote that “successful hyperboles are also metaphors” (*Rhetoric* III.11). Yet hyperbole also departs from

metaphor, as I would like to consider in the following passage, and especially in the way the figurative language of this passage is developed by the narrative that surrounds it. On the verge of his departure from Paris for a vacation in Balbec, after having longed for years to make the trip, the narrator offers the rather unexpected comparison of a trip by train to the crucifixion of Christ. At first, nothing seems less likely; but Proust has ways of convincing us. Let us consider the passage in its entirety, beginning with the narrator's striking description of the Saint-Lazare station:

Malheureusement ces lieux merveilleux que sont les gares, d'où l'on part pour une destination éloignée, sont aussi des lieux tragique, car si le miracle s'y accomplit grâce auquel les pays qui n'avaient encore d'existence que dans notre pensée vont être ceux au milieu desquels nous vivrons, pour cette raison même il faut renoncer, au sortir de la salle d'attente, à retrouver tout à l'heure la chambre familière où l'on était il y a un instant encore. Il faut laisser toute espérance de rentrer coucher chez soi, une fois qu'on s'est décidé à pénétrer dans l'antre empesté par où l'on accède au mystère, dans un de ces grands ateliers vitrés, comme celui de Saint-Lazare où j'allai chercher le train de Balbec, et qui déployait au-dessus de la ville éventrée un de ces immenses ciels crus et gros de menaces amoncelées de drame, pareils à certains ciels, d'une modernité presque parisienne, de Mantegna ou de Véronèse, et sous lequel ne pouvait s'accomplir que quelque acte terrible et solennel comme un départ en chemin de fer ou l'érection de la Croix. (513/I 694)

Taken out of context, the language of this passage is somewhat inexplicable; the physical appearance of the Saint-Lazare station alone does not seem to warrant this description. But we know that the passage is also motivated by the narrator's delight

in the wonder of train travel, and his agony over his immanent separation from his mother. The characterization of the station as “merveilleux” and the trip as a “miracle,” even the use of the word “grâce,” establishes an important continuity with the previous page, echoing the narrator’s description of train trips as “miraculous” and “mysterious” journeys that, because of their speed as well as the unrelenting nature of their course, do not lessen but intensify the contrast between one’s place of origin and that of one’s arrival (512-513/I 693). With its Christian connotations, it is clear this language also helps prepare the way for the crucifixion that terminates the passage. The “antre empesté par où l’on accède au mystère,” too, is a more appropriate description of the empty tomb of Jesus than it is of the glass-roofed station; and even the station’s namesake, Lazarus, evokes the idea of miraculous resurrection. Perhaps it was only the name of the station that triggered this chain of associations in the narrator in the first place. Names, as we know, have their own special laws for Proust’s narrator: “Les mots nous présente des choses une petite image claire et usuelle... Mais les noms présentent des personnes—et des villes qu’ils nous habituent à croire individuelles, uniques comme des personnes—une image confuse qui tire d’eux... la couleur dont elle est peinte (312/I 420).⁸⁹

Yet the image of crucifixion at the end of the passage still seems outlandish and excessively violent, as does the description of the sky, seen through the vaulted glass-and-iron ceiling of the Saint-Lazare station, as “gros de menaces,” and the city itself as “éventrée.”⁹⁰ In the paragraph that follows, we learn that the narrator’s anxiety stems from his having to stay in an unfamiliar room at the Balbec Hotel, and

⁸⁹ C.f. Roland Barthes, “Proust et les noms.”

⁹⁰ Proust mentions the Renaissance artists Mantegna and Véronèse, but the unnamed referent of his description of this “eviscerated” sky, and what allows him to make the less-than-apparent connection to the somber skies of these Italian painters, is likely Claude Monet’s *Gare Sainte-Lazare* (1877) (Lui 221). Proust was a great admirer of Monet, as we know from *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. His description of the station certainly makes more sense in light of Monet’s painting, though the painting in itself can not account for Proust’s motivation in drawing on the image at this particular moment in the narrative.

from the fact that he just learned the previous evening that his mother will not be making the trip with him (513/I 694). He admits to being unhappy. Yet it is not until we glimpse the reflection of his unhappiness in his mother and grandmother's behavior that we begin to understand the real depths of his emotion. His mother, having invented a pretext for leaving the station early so as to spare her son the pain of saying goodbye at the last possible moment, knows her son well, for he subsequently reveals to the reader that he is panicked by the thought of separation, imagining his mother is about to begin a new life without him, and that she has chosen to do so because of the series of disappointments he has caused her. "Pour la première fois je sentais qu'il était possible que ma mère vécût sans moi, autrement que pour moi," he laments (515/I 697).

At this point, the crucifixion metaphor that earlier seemed only tangentially or poorly motivated by the name "Saint-Lazare" might be understood as an instance of hyperbole employed for the sake of emotional insight. Although hyperbole has often been characterized as a kind of "lying figure" or "false semblant" (Puttenham 159), we can see how an exaggerated or seemingly inappropriate image may succeed, not in stretching or disguising the truth of a situation, but in aiming more precisely at its psychological content. That is, it may reveal another kind of truth. When Aristotle treats hyperbole as a kind of metaphor, he goes on to state that hyperboles should be used by "young men" and "angry people," because "they show vehemence of character" (III, 11), which seems to suggest that hyperboles reveal less about their objects than about the character of the person who uses them. In the Saint-Lazare passage, Proust's narrator can be understood to be writing from the pit of his distress to demonstrate that he will experience the pain of separation from his mother like an evisceration, and ultimately like a death on the cross. Hyperbole, in this case, communicates a subjective truth.

Yet there is more precision to Proust's figurative language even than what works to express these extreme emotions. When the narrator finally arrives at his hotel room in Balbec after a long and tiring journey, he describes, in a well-known passage, his anxiety at having to sleep in a strange room. He claims to be as uncomfortable as a man in a cage, crowded by the unfamiliar things around him. A few pages later, he elucidates the meaning of his anxious feelings, crediting these unfamiliar things with a unique kind of resistance:

Peut-être cet effroi que j'avais—qu'ont tant d'autres—de coucher dans une chambre inconnue, peut-être cet effroi n'est-il que la forme la plus humble, obscure, organique, presque inconsciente, de ce grand refus désespéré qu'opposent les choses qui constituent le meilleur de notre vie présente à ce que nous revêtions mentalement de notre acceptation la formule d'un avenir où elles ne figurent pas... (532/I 720)

It might be more logical if it were the bedroom in Paris that, persisting in the narrator's memory, protested against being replaced in his consciousness by the new bedroom in Balbec. But I think the narrator indeed means that it is the Balbec room that puts up resistance to being forgotten in some future time, and that the brutal presence of unfamiliar things is nearly indistinguishable from a future in which they will have been irrevocably lost. That is, the narrator suggests that a first encounter resembles and projects the image of a future loss, encounter and loss perhaps being like symmetrical bookends to a brief-lived presence, and bounded by oblivion.

But what oblivion, exactly, is at stake here? The narrator continues:

[ce] refus ... était encore au fond de la difficulté que j'avais à penser à ma propre mort ou à une survie comme celle que Bergotte promettait aux hommes dans ses livres, dans laquelle je ne pourrais emporter mes souvenirs, mes défauts, mon caractère qui ne se résignaient pas à l'idée

de ne plus être et ne voulaient pour moi ni du néant, ni d'une éternité
où ils ne seraient plus. (532/I 721)

In a swift reversal, it seems no longer to be a question of the resistance of objects to a future time in which they will be absent, but of the *persistence* of objects in a future time from which the narrator himself, his memories and feelings, will be absent. Just as he imagines a life apart from these low bookcases and high ceiling of the Balbec hotel room, so he recoils from the idea of these phenomenal objects continuing their existence, not only apart from him, but after his death. Particularly upsetting is the indifference of these objects in the face of his death, a wounding indifference such as only non-sentient beings are capable.

Indeed, it is nothing less than the death of the self that the narrator describes in these passages. His ruminations turn to the probability of his surviving the loss of his parents and friends, and in a motif he often repeats later, he describes his horror, beyond the idea of their loss, at what must be his inevitable indifference to their loss:

Et la crainte d'un avenir où nous seront enlevés la vue et l'entretien de ceux que nous aimons... cette crainte, loin de se dissiper, s'accroît, si à la douleur d'une telle privation nous pensons que s'ajoutera ce qui pour nous semble actuellement plus cruel encore: ne pas la ressentir comme une douleur, y rester indifférent... ce serait donc une vraie mort de nous-mêmes, mort suivie ... de résurrection, mais en un moi différent.
(533/I 722)

Indifference to loss is experienced by the narrator as a real death of the self. We are made to understand that a change in feeling is indeed a kind of death for a self that is constituted by its affections.

That is, the claim that the self dies when it changes its affections would be a hyperbolic one, were it not perfectly continuous with the narrator's understanding of

what the self actually is. When he first arrives in his alien room in Balbec, he refuses to lie down, arguing that there is in fact “no place” for him there:

J’aurais voulu au moins m’étendre un instant sur le lit, mais à quoi bon puisque je n’aurais pu y faire trouver de repos à cet ensemble de sensations qui est pour chacun de nous son corps conscient, sinon son corps matériel, et puisque les objets inconnus qui l’encerclaient, en le forçant à mettre ses perceptions sur le pied permanent d’une défensive vigilante, auraient maintenu mes regards, mon ouïe, tous mes sens, dans une position ... réduite et incommode... (529/I 716)

What is crowding him are not so much the objects in the room, as we said above, but more precisely the sensations these objects inflict on his “corporeal consciousness,” and the demands they necessarily make of his perceptual apparatus. Because these encounters “force” his perceptions, another self finds itself excluded, the self born from and protected by habit: “C’est notre attention qui met des objets dans une chambre,” the narrator writes, “et l’habitude qui les en retire et nous y fait de la place” (529/I 717). Presumably, the self that has no place in the room is an immaterial and intellectual self, one in which sensations have been properly absorbed and integrated into a spiritual consciousness.⁹¹ Yet it is the self of the “conscious body,” or of the sense encounter, that the narrator laments as condemned to die, and to die in fragments:

Ce sont elles [les parties de l’ancien moi condamnées à mourir]—

⁹¹ The opposition of the intellect to the sensuous self in Proust is well known, as is the role it plays in the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. Proust opens *Contre Sainte-Beuve* with a statement on this opposition: “Chaque jour j’attache moins de prix à l’intelligence. Chaque jour je me rends mieux compte que ce n’est qu’en dehors d’elle que l’écrivain peut ressaisir quelque chose de nos impressions, c’est à dire atteindre quelque chose de lui-même... Ce que l’intelligence nous rend sous le nom de passée n’est pas lui. En réalité, comme il arrive pour les âmes des trépassés dans certaines légendes populaires, chaque heure de notre vie, aussitôt morte, s’incarne et se cache en quelque objet matériel” (43).

mêmes les plus chétives, comme les obscurs attachements aux dimensions, l'atmosphère d'une chambre—qui s'effarent et refusent, en des rébellions où il faut voir un mode secret, partiel, tangible et vrai de la résistance à la mort, de la longue résistance désespérée et quotidienne à la mort fragmentaire et successive telle qu'elle s'insère dans toute la durée de notre vie, détachant de nous à chaque moment des lambeaux de nous-mêmes. (533/I 722)

If we accept the internal logic of this episode in the hotel room, then we can see that when Proust's narrator suggests only pages earlier that his journey to Balbec will be like a crucifixion, he says exactly no more and no less than what he means. Death was indeed at stake in the Saint-Lazare station, and a resurrection was anticipated, like new cell growth where old parts of the self have died, as the narrator later writes (533/I 722). The metaphor of crucifixion implicates this structure of sacrifice and rebirth very precisely, and suggests that a corporeal self will be sacrificed to a spiritual one, or that some sort of transubstantiation will occur. Moreover, we can see how the narrator's fascination with the speed and automation of train travel participates in this logic, for he focuses on the train's capacity "de rendre la différence entre le départ et l'arrivée non pas aussi insensible, mais aussi profonde qu'[il] peut"; and he further qualifies the difference between arrival and departure as the difference not between two physical places, but between the destination as it affects the senses and "telle qu'elle était dans notre pensée quand notre imagination nous portait du lieu où nous vivions jusqu'au coeur d'un lieu désiré" (512/I 693). Effecting this transubstantiation of imagination and desire, train travel indeed accomplishes "un bond miraculeux" (ibid).

In short, I would argue that what at first appeared to be hyperbolic in the description of Saint-Lazare—language that was ill-fitting for the situation and

exaggerated with respect to its meaning—turns out to be far more precise than we could have known. It is true this structure of belated revelation is typical of Proust's novel, and that the movement from surface to depth, impression to understanding, is explicitly and repeatedly thematized. But I wonder if this movement might not, nevertheless, have a special relationship to the figure of hyperbole.

The narrator's story about the fragmentary and successive deaths of the sensual self, the sacrifice and conversion of these affections into a spiritual self, mirrors, I would suggest, the uneasy position of hyperbole with respect to metaphor. While a metaphorical operation can be understood to effect a kind of complete "transubstantiation,"⁹² setting up a reciprocal exchange between a sensual image and conceptual content, hyperbole is recognized as such only insofar as the exchange it claims to set up is necessarily partial, ill-fitting, unconvincing, or unsuccessful—in other words, exaggerated. This is not to say that hyperbole is an unsuccessful figure of speech, but that its very success lies in its being recognized as different from metaphor, and in at least part of its meaning lying beyond the supposed reciprocity of metaphorical exchange. In exaggerating, hyperbole seems to have the additional purpose of communicating an attitude towards the objects it treats (perhaps conveying what Aristotle called "vehemence"). In communicating an attitude, hyperbole carves out a space for a subject among the objects depicted—or rather, it projects a subject, much as the magic lantern projects the figures of Golo and Geneviève de Brabant on

⁹² Indeed, Proust uses this very term to describe the conversion of life into language. In a letter to Léon Daudet from November 27, 1913, he envisions a kind of writing that would be "le miracle suprême, la transsubstantiation des qualités irrationnelles de la matière et de la vie dans des mots humains" (*Lettres* 195). C.f. citations of this letter by Julia Kristeva in *Le temps sensible* (264) and Gérard Genette in "Proust palimpseste" (4). "Transubstantiation" is indeed the word Proust intends, for in his view the matter of life is not insubstantiated by language, but converted into a new substance, what he calls the writer's "style." In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, he writes: "Dans le style de Flaubert, par exemple, toutes les parties de la réalité sont converties en une même substance... Toutes les choses s'y peignent, mais par reflet, sans en altérer la substance homogène" (201). Deleuze likewise points to Proust's substantialization of style by referring to it as "cette matière lumineuse" and "ce milieu réfractant" (*Proust et les signes* 42/47).

the narrator's bedroom wall. In fact, I think it would not be wrong to characterize hyperbole as a subject-forming figure. In this respect, hyperbole bears an important affinity to irony.

Irony is the figure of self-consciousness *par excellence*, in which, as Paul de Man points out, the subject of an ironic utterance is split into a knowing, ironic self and a displaced, inauthentic self, the object of the irony ("Rhetoric" 214), just as self-consciousness divides into a subject and object of consciousness. In both hyperbole and irony, "the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous, and in both figures, moreover, this relationship relies on "an extraneous principle that determines the point and the manner at and in which the relationship is articulated" (de Man, "Rhetoric" 209). That is, both figures depend on the projection of an intentional speaker "beyond" the utterance to account for the disjunction between language and meaning, or language and context. But hyperbole lacks the specular structure of irony; the subject and object of hyperbole do not coincide, as they do in irony (unless one is being hyperbolic and ironic at the same time, in which case hyperbole is most likely put in the service of irony, and irony remains the determining factor). In this way, hyperbole seems to be situated somewhere between metaphor and irony,⁹³ a figure of self-differentiation in excess of metaphor but lacking with respect to self-conscious irony.

If the image of crucifixion in the description of the Saint-Lazare station is later revealed to be more appropriate than it first appeared, if the meaning of the image is explicated in passages that follow it, then the image also possess a hyperbolic status

⁹³ Rhetoricians have long considered the plausibility of a logical order of figures of speech. In *The New Science* (1725, 1740), Giambattista Vico identified four basic tropes to which all others could be reduced—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—which, he argued, represented successive stages of consciousness as well as the ages of history (White 32). In *Metahistory* (1973), as well as in "Narrative, Description, and Topology in Proust" from *Figural Realism* (1999) Hayden White makes use of the same topological sequence. Harold Bloom, in *A Map of Misreading* (1975), argues for a sequence of six major tropes to describe the process of poetic influence, and he specifies their particular order as: irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor, and metalepsis (Bloom 70).

with respect to the narrative itself, much as we have seen earlier with the impressions of the Martinville steeples. Moreover, in the movement from ill-fitting to fitting, exaggeration to representation, we experienced the transformation of our own understanding of the figure from hyperbole to metaphor (or at least to something approaching metaphor). But such a transformation can take place only through the construction of this other hyperbole of narrative structure, in which the isolated passage points beyond itself towards a future revelation. In so doing, it also projects a new subject to account for this new, temporal disjunction. This new subject is, of course, still the narrator; but it is the narrator no longer understood as an affective self synchronous with a single scene, but as a diachronic consciousness comprising multiple states that are subject to progressive transformation and synthesis. Hyperbole resembles irony in this respect, too, as it is capable of being expanded into an allegory of revelation and self-transformation.

If we return to the episode of the narrator's encounter with the Martinville steeples, then we might ask whether the fragment of writing he produces has an ironic status with respect to the rest of text. Perhaps this fragment is not presented to us as an example of especially fine writing, as we are initially encouraged to believe, but as the narrator's novice and ultimately failed attempt to convert a sense impression into prose that is worthy of it, the representation of a technique and a philosophy of writing that the narrator no longer subscribes to by the end of the novel. In other words, perhaps the page is indicative of a naive position that will be displaced by a greater self-consciousness, and by a style of writing indicative of this self-consciousness.

In the explicitly superficial nature of its images, which we noted earlier, the writing Proust's hero produces lacks any real development or continuity beyond that of the continuous and continually shifting vantage point of the narrator. An abundance of metaphors, similes, and personifications are pressed into the service of

capturing these sense impressions; but unlike the crucifixion metaphor in the Saint-Lazare passage, this language seems to have no significance other than its sensory content, which is perhaps what makes it so difficult to read. That is, unlike the narrator's metaphoric descriptions of his jealous loves, or of his experiences of high society, or of almost any other event in the novel, the lyrical and densely figurative writing in this fragment seems to reveal no higher truth, or idea, or meaningful law, or insight into character psychology or human behavior. The choice of images here does not even draw very deeply on elements from the surrounding landscape, as Proust's treatment of steeples tend to do.⁹⁴ The steeples' significance, we are told, is a personal one for the narrator, the aspiring writer whose ultimate task will be to translate the hieroglyphics of his own impressions, that "inner book of unknown symbols" (2272/III 913), into a universally intelligible work of art.

Critics have long observed the discrepancy between the classical conception of metaphor and what goes by the name of "metaphor" in Proust, in which claims of resemblance are bolstered or even replaced by relations of spatio-temporal or linguistic contiguity. In his foundational study "Métonymie chez Proust," Gérard Genette, following Stephen Ullmann's observations in *Language and Style*, notes, "il faut observer que les exemples de métaphores 'naturelles' cités dans *Le temps retrouvé* sont en fait, typiquement, des substitutions synecdochique" (58). So often that it appears to be the rule rather than the exception in Proust, "la métaphore trouve

⁹⁴ Genette's analysis in "Métonymie chez Proust" describes what the author terms "diegetic metaphors," and begins with two of Proust's descriptive passages that address objectively similar objects—the steeples of Saint-André-des-champs and those of Saint-Mars-le-Vêtu—with distinctly different language; one pair of steeples is likened to spears of wheat, while the other to scaly, pointy fish, because, as Genette points out, of the distinctly different landscapes to which the steeples belong. This is typical enough of Proust's style: "Clocher-épi (ou église-meule) en plein champs, clocher-poisson à la mer, clocher pourpre au-dessus des vignobles... il y a manifestement chez Proust une sorte de schème stylistique récurrent, presque stéréotypé, qu'on pourrait appeler le topos du *clocher-caméléon*" (Genette 44). While it is true the Martinville steeples are likened to birds on the plain, and at this moment Proust can be said to draw metonymically on an element of the surrounding landscape, this particular diegetic metaphor is not extended in any rigorous way. Instead we are presented with a kaleidoscope of different images like so many hasty, impressionistic sketches.

son appui et sa motivation dans une métonymie” (45). Even the operation of involuntary memory, which is supposed to deliver what Proust’s hero calls the “essence” of the past, draws its real power from metonymic, and not metaphoric, association. That is, what the madeleine of involuntary memory ultimately reveals is not a similar madeleine dunked in tea once before, but what Proust calls “l’édifice immense du souvenir”: “toutes les fleurs de notre jardin et celles du parc d M. Swann, et les nymphéas de la Vivonne, et les bonnes gens du village et leurs petits logis et l’église et tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité ... sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé” (47/I 51).

The philosophical problem with Proust’s assertions, as Paul de Man make clear in “Reading (Proust),” and Jonathan Culler in “The Turns of Metaphor,” is that what the narrative explicitly claims to be an essential relationship, the “‘necessary link’ of a resemblance (and potential identity) rooted in a shared property” (de Man 66), is repeatedly revealed to be a contingent and accidental connection. In Gentte’s terms, claims about resemblances are revealed to rely on relations of merely spatio-temporal proximity. Yet I would point out that any discrepancy between Proust’s claims and the actual construction of his figures, between what he calls the essence of the past and what he demonstrates to be the metonymic structure of involuntary memory, only appears as such if we look for meaning on the side of the objects rather than the subject of comparison.

On the other hand, if we take the narrator at his word when, describing the phenomenon of involuntary memory and the “essence précieuse” delivered by his mouthful of tea and cake, he exclaims, “ou plutôt cette essence n’était pas en moi, elle était moi” (45/I 48), we might understand the relationship of metonymy to metaphor quite differently. Samuel Weber observes that the spatio-temporal unity that guarantees the sense of Proustian metonymy is not an objective one, in fact, but a

subjective one: “Their [metonymies’] place is never simply homogeneous space but the site of the subject,” he writes; “it is not contiguity as such but *contiguity with the subject* that determines the Proustian metonymy” (929). Thus the narrator recalls a series of sensations and images of Venice, not because of the proximity of space and time in which they were first experienced, but because of his own bodily participation in the scene, which has conferred a unity on them: “c’était Venise ... que la sensation que j’avais ressentie jadis sur deux dalles inégales du baptistère de Saint-Marc m’avait rendue avec toutes les autres sensations jointes ce jour-là à cette sensation-là,” he writes, making clear the metonymic concatenation of sensation (2263/ III 900). Just as we saw hyperbole to rely on an extraneous principle—an intentional subject—to account for the disjunction between sign and meaning, so, too, does Proustian metonymy continually and quite explicitly appeal to a metaphoric operation of appropriation and identity formation, the formation of a uniquely subjective vision.⁹⁵ Perhaps metonymy and metaphor are not opposed in Proust so much as they represent the two opposite poles of what is depicted as a movement of subjective appropriation, a movement I would characterize as hyperbolic, as it traces hyperbole’s constitutively incomplete passage from disjunction to recognition. Thus I do not wish to claim that the passage from metonymy to metaphor, or from contingency to necessity, is hyperbolic, but to suggest that hyperbole may be the only possible representation of such an impossible passage, or the only way to claim that it is possible in the first place.

In *Le temps retrouvé*, Proust’s narrator gives us a clear, if idiosyncratic, definition of what he means by metaphor, and indicates its role in the book he will undertake:

[L]a vérité ne commencera qu’au moment où l’écrivain prendra deux

⁹⁵ C.f. Kristeva, 268

objets différents, posera leur rapport, analogue dans le monde de l'art à celui qu'est le rapport unique de la loi causale dans le monde de la science ... Même, ainsi que la vie, quand en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une et l'autre ... dans une métaphore (2280/III 925).

He claims a writer will discover truth not in the relation between two similar objects, but between two dissimilar ones, so that the "essence" he extracts can not logically belong to either one of them, but indicates a kind of third term in the equation, this strange point at which an unmotivated comparison is converted into a relationship as necessary as a law of physics. This third term can only be understood as the narrator's own self, a self constituted by so many corporeal sensations and perceived relations.

In his reading of the steeples of Martinville passage, Joshua Landy similarly argues that "the aim of a metaphor can be—and in Marcel's description quite explicitly is—to convey not an objective but a subjective connection between two impressions or ideas, and that this subjective connection can possess a type of local inescapability" (73). Following this, and returning to the steeples of Martinville episode, we can understand the variegated images proposed by the narrator's page of writing to reveal the "local" necessity of a subjective vision, insofar as the metonymic stutter of images becomes nothing more than the very locus *of* the narrator's subjectivity, the flat surface on which it is projected.

Landy goes on to interpret the significance of the narrator's writing in two ways. First, he argues, the images represent the "unique aspect of his perspective, the part he shares with nobody else"—this being, Landy claims, the narrator's predilection for flowers and girls (59). Second, he proposes that "the set of impressions considered as a whole ... communicates a universal, objective truth, namely that every human being has a unique perspective" (77). Thus he concludes that "the images do not, in

the end, teach us anything about the steeples themselves” (67). Unfortunately, this conclusion seems to me to be doubly unconvincing. While it is clear that girls and flowers are significant throughout the *Recherche*—given Marcel’s predilection for hawthorns and Swann’s for cattleyas, not to mention the extended botanical metaphor that opens *Sodome et Gomorrhe*—their appearance in the Martinville passage is not so unique or idiosyncratic to be deeply revealing of a perspective shared “with nobody else”; flowers and girls, considered in general as Landy proposes, are rather pedestrian symbols, and they are isolated enough from other flowers and girls in the novel to suggest that they are called upon here as culturally available clichés. On the other hand, the idea that this passage can be meaningfully summarized by the proposition “every human being has a unique perspective” is equally unsatisfying, as it disregards any particularity whatsoever in the narrator’s perception. I would suggest instead that what *is* unique is simply the articulation of these particular metaphors themselves, the irreducibility of these images to a general preference for flowers and girls, as well as their stubborn insistence on *still* teaching us something about the steeples—that is, their refusal to give up their referential function, even as they indicate an intentional or subjective one.

What the narrator claims lay “behind” the steeples, or hidden “inside” of them—“comme si elles avaient été une sorte d’écorce,” he writes—is rather his own prose: “quelque chose d’analogue à une jolie phrase” (149/I 197), as we have seen. Proust’s metaphors of depth are turned inside out when he suggests that a page of writing may be the true “meaning” of these three-dimensional objects. But what, then, can possibly be “behind” the page of writing?

There is such a thoroughgoing immanence of the self to its impressions in the *Recherche*, and of impressions to the objective world, that a hyperbolic movement seems to be required to appropriate these elements into a meaningful whole. Earlier,

we saw that the narrator's corporeal self was constituted by a successive concatenation of sensations, like so many fragments or "slices." We should note that the "whole of Combray" or the whole of Venice is not available to this self contemporaneous with its sense experiences, but only to a temporal self or subject, one transcendent to the experience in question, in keeping, of course, with Proust's discourses on the anesthetizing effects of habit. Yet this temporal subject is only available, in turn, to an extra-temporal subject, the ecstatic subject of involuntary memory. Just as the writer places two dissimilar objects side by side to reveal their "common essence," we witness this atemporal subject grasping two isolated moments in time to reveal their necessary connection, "quelque chose qui, commun à la fois au passé et au présent, est beaucoup plus essentiel qu'eux deux" (2266/III 905). Thus with the madeleine as well as with the paving stones, the narrator discovers a joyous indifference to death (2263/III 900), and truly becomes "[un] homme affranchi de l'ordre du temps" (2267/III 906). Because these impressions appeal hyperbolically to a subject that lies outside of them, however, they cannot help but testify to a persistent non-coincidence between subject, self and world, and offer intimations of a self that persists as mere sensation, and of sensation that threatens to dissolve into so many scattered, inanimate phenomena that first gave rise to it.⁹⁶

What the extra-temporal subject ultimately discovers, as we know, is the destiny of the experience of his life to become the material for a book, a destiny that can only be represented as a vocation. Perhaps this book will be the transcendent site of a new subject, the text as "le lieu même de sa pensée" (Genette, "Proust et le langage indirect" 22), and the co-existence of multiple meanings in a self-conscious

⁹⁶ Leo Bersani is convincing on this point when he describes involuntary memory as a kind of death: "For if such memories revive the past as nothing more than the self that lived it ... they also effect, belatedly and retroactively, a radical separation of the self from the world. If, for example, the madeleine resurrects a wholly internalized Combray, it also projects or throws forth from within that internalization a Combray of pure appearance, a Combray that persists phenomenally" (9).

whole, “la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécu” (2284/III 931). Or perhaps instead the book will be like a tomb, a lifeless monument to people, places, and things that have been covered over and forgotten. “[U]n livre est un grand cimetière,” the narrator writes a few pages later, “où sur la plupart des tombes on ne peut plus lire les noms effacés” (2291/III 940). When Proust’s narrator describes the process of uniting two different objects in a metaphor, he goes on to say that a writer must “enchaîner à jamais dans sa phrase les deux termes différents ... les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d’un beau style” (2280/III 925). This theory of essences is also a theory of style. At the same time two objects are supposed to be lifted outside of themselves and converted into their “common essence,” we witness their committal to prose, or to a prosaic style whose chain-like “rings” recall the very metonymic concatenation that was supposed to be superseded by metaphor.

If there is a spiritualization in Proust, a conversion of impressions into truths, there is a concomitant substantialization of truth into art, which we witness in discussions of an artist’s or writer’s style, “une matière distincte, nouvelle” (2265/III 904), where “toutes les parties de la réalité sont converties en une même substance ... homogène” (*Sainte Beuve* 201). It remains unclear whether this substance belongs to the higher life of literature, or to the lifeless materiality of the letter. What is so revealing about the figure of hyperbole in the case of Proust is not only the disjunction it initiates between what it says and what it means, or between what it claims and what it knows, a disjunction also present in irony (and certainly the *Recherche* is rich in irony) but more precisely the disjunction it *perpetuates* in never fully departing from reference, and never coming together as a full-fledged guarantee of self-consciousness. Hyperbole is constitutionally bound to what it overcomes; it does not surrender its objective aspect even as it gains a subjective one. With one foot in the

phenomenal world, and the other beyond it, this figure helps capture the precariousness and genuine reversibility of Proustian transcendence.

CHAPTER SIX

“NOT SOLVE IT BUT BE IN IT”: STEIN AND COMPOSITION

Is there something distinctly modern about Gertrude Stein’s notion of “composition?” In Chapter One, we characterized early German romanticism according to a structuring tension between system and freedom, chaos and order, form and form’s overcoming, a tension that, among Friedrich Schlegel and his group, found its most fitting expression in the theory and practice of the fragment. Moreover, we found philosophical concepts of reflection and organic development to be at the heart of romantic treatments of literary form. In Chapter Four, by contrast, we saw how Samuel Beckett’s trilogy presented a distinct challenge to the romantic schema of self-reflection by revealing a certain non-coincidence with itself, rendering problematic those readings that would approach Beckett’s work as a kind of lucid self-commentary by means of its own figures. I would like to complete this study by turning to Gertrude Stein’s work in order to examine her mobilization of what on the surface may appear to be familiarly romantic categories—mind and nature, theory and practice, fragment and totality—and consider their difference from their treatment in romanticism. Perhaps it is at the point of her departure from the romantic paradigm that we can locate what we might call Stein’s “modernism.”

Stein was first known for the modern art collection she assembled with her brother Leo after moving to Paris in 1904, and in a well-known interview given in the last year of her life, she commented on the importance of these works to her experimental writing. Cézanne’s paintings first impressed upon her “a new feeling about composition,” and gave her a sense of the “realism of composition,” which she described as follows: “Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in

itself, and Cezanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole and that impressed me enormously” (“A Transatlantic Interview” 98). This equality among parts and whole, which contributed to what art critics have famously called a “flatness” in Cézanne’s paintings,⁹⁷ Stein termed “evenness”; and she suggested that her early experimental narrative, and in particular her turn from *Three Lives* to the mammoth *The Making of Americans*, was motivated by “a need for evenness” (99). It is the novelty of Stein’s conception of the relationship of parts to whole in a composition that I would like to consider in what follows, as I attempt to sketch the contours of Stein’s notion of the literary work. I will begin with Stein’s *Making of Americans* before turning to some of the more explicit statements the author makes in her subsequent literary-critical writings.

I.

The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress, which Stein worked on intermittently from 1903-1911 (Katz 35),⁹⁸ did not find a publisher until 1925, when it was brought out in Paris by Robert McAlmon’s Contact Editions. The novel is disproportionate in every sense. At nine-hundred and twenty-five pages, its physical girth is matched only by the size of its ambitions. While its subtitle announces a family chronicle, the purported subject soon expands to include “histories of every one [the family] ever came to know in their living” (*Making* 284), until the discourse evolves into a strange and pulsating sort of character typology, purporting to identify and classify people’s “bottom natures” with the newly adjusted aim of describing “every kind of men and every kind of women who ever were or are or will

⁹⁷ See, for example, Clement Greenberg’s “Cézanne and the Unity of Modern Art” (1951).

⁹⁸ Despite the claim of the title page of the first edition that the book was written in 1906-1908, which Stein reiterates in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. These were the principle years of composition, but Katz has shown that parts of the manuscript were begun much earlier.

be living” (220). While Edmund Wilson’s definitive *Axel’s Castle* (1931), which devoted an entire chapter to Stein, had no qualms suggesting the work was impossible to read (Wilson 239), Stein’s own estimation placed *The Making of Americans* alongside *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past* as one of the three truly “important things written in this generation” (“Portraits” 184).

Recent critics take the work more seriously than Wilson, most often noting its destructive or deconstructive effects. Stein’s *Making of Americans* “amounts to a slow murder of the Victorian novel,” writes Lisa Ruddick; even more fundamentally, it “has the effect of unsettling key categories of Victorian thinking: objective history; science as ‘truth’; and character, or the integrated subject” (Ruddick 125). “The primary strategies of Stein’s *Making of Americans*,” writes another, “self-reflexively dismantle their own and, by inference, other texts’ narrative and rhetorical conventions” (Taylor 27). Yet while I agree that the novel certainly engages in a critical project, I fear such views risk disseminating the idea that Stein’s elaborate endeavor amounts to no more than a negative exercise. Moreover, at least some of them rely on the conceit that the novel has to begin with an uncritical acceptance of nineteenth-century categories in order subsequently to dismantle them: thus Stephanie Hawkins, for example, writes that the novel “begins as an empirical project emulating nineteenth-century conventions of classification” in order to “culminate” in their “radical reformulation” (Hawkins 70).

I would like to consider instead the positive or constructive aspects of the novel, even if these involve the construction of certain tensions. In particular, I will consider the kind of aesthetic experience the novel cultivates. While the work’s composition history does reveal that Stein substantially modified her initial drafts (Dydo, *A Gertrude Stein Reader* 17-18), the opening paragraphs of the published novel already introduce concerns that run through the entire project, even if the novel

becomes increasingly radical as it progresses.⁹⁹ The work begins with a parable Stein cites again in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, followed by the narrator's commentary: "Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. 'Stop!' cried the groaning old man at last, 'Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree.' / It is hard living down the tempers we are born with" (3). With the beginnings of this interpretive gloss, Stein introduces a significant dichotomy between temperament that is inborn and the event of "living down"—or perhaps simply living—one's temper. Yet the parable extends beyond this interpretation, as it seems to relate a story of generational rebellion and generational compliance at one and the same time, or of passion and the acculturation of that passion. Steven Meyer notes that Stein has taken the anecdote from one of Montaigne's essays (Meyer xxxiv), which has in turn borrowed the story from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Montaigne it serves to illustrate the idea that custom may "infringe on the rules of nature" to such a degree that we confuse it with nature itself (Montaigne 122-130). Stein's novel wrestles with these very concerns as well as their immediate complication: it investigates psychological types or natures at the same time as it struggles to write a family chronicle as well as a generalized history of these types; moreover, it poses the question of where one begins and the other ends. Jennifer Ashton notes that the relationship between "history" and "kind" remains undefined throughout the novel (Ashton 36). Perhaps the question of this relationship is the structuring question of the novel itself.

We might characterize the tension between "history" and "kind" as one of diachronic versus synchronic knowledge, or of knowledge from temporal experience versus knowledge from static concepts. Both of these oppositions reappear later in

⁹⁹ Steven Meyer convincingly locates a major shift on page seventy-eight, where the narrative first begins to seek a generalized character typology beyond the bounds of familial relations (Meyer, Introduction xix).

Stein's meditations in *The Geographical History of America*, as we will see. In the opening of *The Making of Americans*, Stein introduces her chronicle of the Dehning family with an observation about the way we tend to experience personal identity in time, our own identity as well as that of others:

We, living now, are always to ourselves young men and women. When we, living always in such feeling, think back to them who make for us a beginning, it is always as grown and old men and women or as little children that we feel them, these whose lives we have just been thinking. ... Yes it is easy to think ourselves and our friends, all our lives as young grown men and women, indeed it is hard for us to feel even when we talk it long, that we are old like old men and women or little as a baby or as children. Such parts of our living are never really there to us as present, to our feeling. (4-5).

While other people may be babies or old people for us, and while these are the positions they occupy in our family narratives, we only really experience ourselves as “grown and young.” Even as children, Stein writes, we experience ourselves as young adults, and even when we age, we continue to experience ourselves as young adults, because “no one can be old ... to himself in his feeling” (5). Stein's observations implicate a more general distinction between different temporal perspectives: between formed identities or completed events on the one hand, and the still-mutable, living present on the other, a present one experiences and within which one feels capable of action, direction, and self-determination. This distinction might be described grammatically as one of aspect, marked in French by the use of the imperfect as opposed to that of the simple past, and in English by the use of progressive verb forms. Stein's zealous use of the present progressive is, of course, the most conspicuous and persistent feature of her style; perhaps this represents her attempts to

create a sense of the “prolonged present,” as she terms it in “Composition as Explanation.”

In “Composition as Explanation,” Stein also refers to a “continuous present,” linking the latter to *The Making of Americans*; and while scholars note the author does a poor job distinguishing between the “prolonged” and the “continuous” present,¹⁰⁰ I would suggest that an important distinction is nevertheless born out by Stein’s comments both in this essay and elsewhere. Stein describes the prolonged present as “a natural composition in the world” (“Composition as Explanation” 31), which suggests that the term is linked to the structure of lived experience, organized or composed for the purpose of action in the world. The “continuous present,” by contrast, evokes the atemporal arrangement of an abstract concept or aesthetic composition. Both of these time-senses are formative and conflicting forces in *The Making of Americans*.

When she later described *The Making of Americans* in her lecture tour of 1933-34, Stein spoke of having tried to capture in each paragraph “a space of time that is ... always filled with moving” (“The Gradual Making of the *Making of Americans*” 258). This “space of time” might describe Stein’s attempt to build “continuous presents” out of a series of “prolonged presents”—that is, to construct atemporal arrangements of temporal material. Whether or not the “spaces of time” correspond exactly to individual paragraphs, this term does convey a strong sense of the experience of reading this novel. Though there are plot elements, there is almost no suspense at all. Stein repeatedly sketches all the events of a character’s life with a single statement, and then subsequently develops supporting details by slowly following minute variations within a series of repetitions, as, for example, in this typical description of Fanny Hissen:

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Ulla Dydo in *A Stein Reader* (494) and *The Language that Rises*, 94-5).

The mother who was to bear the three children, she perhaps would come to an important feeling, she did not have it as a natural thing to have really an important feeling. With her it must come from a, to her, not natural way of living, and it first had its beginning with her friendship with the Shilling women. Then it came to be stronger with the living in Gossols in the ten acre place in the part of Gossols where no other rich people were living, where she was cut off from the rich living which was for her the natural way of being. (77)

This paragraph begins with the temporally condensed perspective of the future anterior, and it presents several major phases of Fanny Hissen's life that will later be developed later over the course of hundreds of pages. By taking suspense out of the narrative, Stein creates a kind of temporally "flattened" perspective.

The relationship between "history" and "kind" in the novel is nowhere more evident than in Stein's relentless use of repetition. Like repeated brush strokes from which a visual image slowly takes shape, Stein's overlapping phrases accumulate to form abstract psychological portraits. At the same time, they develop a sort of meta-theory of repetition, of written repetition as well as lived. Stein diminishes the difference between repetition in language and in life when she repeatedly suggests that we learn to "listen" to lived repetition (294). According to the narrator's theorization, then, a person's nature can be observed through his repeated behaviors:

The nature in every one is always coming out of them from their beginning to their ending by the repeating always in them, by the repeating always coming out from each one. Sometimes, often, one looking at some one forgets about that one many things one knows in that one, always soon then such a one brings it back to remember it about that one the things one is not then thinking by the repeating that

is always in each one. Always then everybody is always repeating the whole nature of them and to any one who looks always at each one always the whole of that one one is then seeing keeps coming out of such a one. So any one can know about any one the nature of that one from the repeating that is the whole of each one. (186)

In sum, the narrator concludes, “the whole of every one is always coming out in repeating” (ibid.). This last line may sound like a thesis of expression, in which repetitions emanate from and express the whole of a person’s nature, but the paragraph cited above reveals a more epistemological orientation, where repetitions are remembered or forgotten, stored or discarded, by an observer. This approach to identity-formation replaces fixed or essential determinations with an epistemological, experiential and temporally drawn-out process of an accumulation of data or “agglutination,” to use Sianne Ngai’s word (Ngai 263). Yet while this drawn-out approach certainly poses a challenge to our culturally ingrained habits of identification or concept formation, so too do Stein’s identities themselves: the categories at which she arrives are no less strange than the process by which she gets there.

Over the course of the novel, Stein divides all men and women into two broad kinds of people: “resisters” and “attackers,” or those with “dependent independent” natures and others with “independent dependent” natures. The range of interplay between varying degrees of these kinds is what produces action in the novel. The kinds are general enough that it seems possible to map them on to the two poles of concept formation itself: on to what might be termed the “attacking” activity of repeating and the “resisting” reception of a given concept, as well as on to the ensuing mental dialectic. In her reading of the novel, Lisa Ruddick draws out resonances between Stein’s characterizations and the psychology of William James, suggesting that Stein’s characters might be interpreted as figures of warring mental faculties, so

that the novel “dramatizes as affective play *between people* the play of faculties James attributed to the individual mind” (Ruddick 70).¹⁰¹ It is well known that James was a valued mentor of Stein’s, “the important person in [her] Radcliffe life,” as Stein declared (*Autobiography* 73); she worked with him in his laboratory at Harvard and subsequently followed his advice in enrolling in medical school at Johns Hopkins (Mellow 31-34). For his part, James reportedly considered the young Stein to be one of his most brilliant pupils (Wilson 237).¹⁰²

In what James described as the two opposing poles of human mental life, we can hear echoes of Stein’s own classifications: “There is an everlasting struggle in every mind,” James writes in his *Briefer Course*, assigned reading in Stein’s introductory psychology course, “between the tendency to keep unchanged, and the tendency to renovate, its ideas. Our education is a ceaseless compromise between the conservative and the progressive factors. Every new experience must be disposed of under some old head” (James 194; cited in Ruddick 20). *The Making of Americans* seems to be laboring under these very same tensions—between the old and the new, repetition and conceptual heading, experience and abstraction—at the same time as it dramatizes this conflict with its typologies of human kinds, “resisters” and “attackers,” and all of the possible variations of mixtures of these kinds. Yet while James describes our “education” as a “ceaseless compromise” of such tension, I would suggest that Stein is guided by a very different notion of education.

Whether or not *The Making of Americans* is a wholly successful literary experiment, it certainly offers its readers an aesthetic experience that is without

¹⁰¹ While Ruddick justly notes that “it is a commonplace of Stein criticism that her stylistic experimentation owes something to ... James’s idea of the ‘stream of consciousness’” (13-4), her own approach differs by turning to content rather than style in Stein’s novels for an allegory of mental faculties (18).

¹⁰² For an excellent reading of the importance of Stein’s scientific training to her writing, see Steven Meyer’s *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (2001).

parallel. What it communicates is perhaps above all a kind of aesthetic education. In the opening of the “Martha Hersland” chapter, the narrator of the novel comes to the fore, introducing a new theme of “loving repetition,” one that might readily serve as a model for the reader puzzling his or her own way through this colossally strange book. Stein’s narrator is almost chanting: “There are many that I know and they know it. They are all of them repeating and I hear it. I love it and I tell it. I love it and now I will write it. This is now a history of my love of it” (291). The novel’s aims have expanded again, this time from gathering “a complete history of every one who ever was or is or will be living” to including a kind of meta-history of the one affectionately compiling such a history. After all, the narrator announces: “This is now a history of the way they do it. This is now a history of the way I love it” (ibid.). As the chapter progresses, it explicitly links “loving repeating” to the “many ways ... of learning the complete being in any one” (306). The narrator continues: “Always loving repeating is my way of being. This is now some description of my studying... This is now some description of learning to hear, see and feel all repeating that each one always is making” (307). Much later, Stein will make the connection to art more explicit, suggesting that learning to heed repetition constitutes its own form of beauty. “I am describing what is to me a beautiful thing,” intones the narrator: “learning being in women and in men. Every little bit, every single bit of learning being in women and men is to me a beautiful thing” (646).

What we are supposed to learn may have something to do with tuning in to these “bits” of repetition before they are entirely “disposed of under some old head.” We are asked to heed the minute variations in repetition that constitute “difference without a concept,” as Deleuze describes it.¹⁰³ Apprehending repetition, yet without

¹⁰³ Ngai makes this very apt connection to Deleuze in her own reading of *The Making of Americans* (Ngai 252).

giving up on the task of understanding, involves the cultivation of what Stein calls an “open feeling” (c.f. Ngai 261). She writes: “Always, one having loving repeating to getting completed understanding must have in them an open feeling, a sense for all the slightest variations in repeating, must never lose themselves so in the solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation” (294). *The Making of Americans*, in short, might be read as a kind of love letter declaring as well as demonstrating an exemplary fidelity to these “slightest variations in repeating.”

II.

Stein’s literary-critical writings take up some of these same concerns, especially her 1926 lecture “Composition as Explanation,” her extended meditation on the nature of “masterpieces” and their relation to the human mind in *The Geographical History of America*, as well as the lecture that developed out this work, “What are Masterpieces and Why are There so Few of Them,” delivered ten years later in 1936.

The two lectures both take up the question of what art is; and while they belong to roughly the same period in a writing career that spanned nearly half a century, they also mark very different moments in this career. “Composition as Explanation” was Stein’s first public lecture, delivered to the undergraduate literary societies at Oxford and Cambridge in June 1926, and printed later that month by Hogarth Press. The lecture was organized on the heels of what was more or less a resounding non-response to the 1925 publication of *The Making of Americans*. Stein claims to have penned the whole of “Composition as Explanation” in a mechanic’s shed in Montrouge, where she sat watching her Ford “being taken to pieces and put together again” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*)—the perfect workshop for an artist of the industrial age, and one who identified with the twentieth century itself,¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ “I belong to the generation who born in the nineteenth century spent all the early part of my life in escaping from it,” writes Stein with her literal-minded humor, “and the rest of it in being the twentieth century yes of course” (*Wars I Have Seen* 80).

but likely something of an exaggeration, as material anticipating Stein's lecture appeared in several of her writings that winter (Dydo 493-4). "Composition as Explanation" has been referred to as Stein's "statement of method" (Nadel 4), though we might also note that the lecture format was not one with which the author was entirely comfortable, as she found that the presence of the audience introduced a measure of self-consciousness into her work: "One of the things that I discovered in lecturing," she writes elsewhere, "was that gradually one ceased to hear what one said one heard what the audience hears one say, that is the reason that oratory is practically never a master-piece" ("Masterpieces" 86).

The lecture begins with what I would argue is its central concern, the relationship between action and vision, doing and seeing, and the effect of both on what Stein calls "composition": "There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking" (25-6). There are several ways of reading the opening words of this unpunctuated sentence, although all of them seem to contribute to the same prismatic assertion. We might read the sentence as saying, "there is ... nothing that makes a difference": this way seems almost defeatist in tone, but it does resemble other statements about sameness in the essay, such as "nothing changes from generation to generation" (26, 30) and "naturally since everything is alike" (33). But "there is singularly nothing that makes a difference" also suggests that no *singular* thing is enough to constitute difference; two or more things, in other words, are needed. Along these lines, we might read the sentence as if it were punctuated, "There is singularly nothing. *That* makes a difference." This statement claims that nothing exists singularly, and that very fact makes a difference.

"Composition," Stein continues, "is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations" (26). "Composition" is aligned with

difference in this essay. Yet what differs, somewhat surprisingly, is not a manner of looking, writing, or painting; not the medium or the means, but the object of perception itself: “The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen,” and “nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen” (ibid.). At the same time, “what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.” Here, “doing” determines a way of “seeing.” Stein’s philosophical touchstone for this point is likely Henri Bergson; and though Bergson’s influence on Stein is not as extensive as James,’ Stein did attend Bergson’s lectures in Paris (Allegra Stewart 5), presumably when Bergson was at the height of his popularity.¹⁰⁵ In linking perception to action, Stein echoes one of the central tenets of Bergson’s *Matière et Mémoire* (1896), that of the orientation of our perception towards our capacity to act in the world. As Bergson writes, “notre corps marque les parties et les aspects de la matière sur lesquels nous aurions prise ... [N]otre perception ... mesure justement notre action virtuelle sur les choses” (*Matière et mémoire* 106). In still other terms, Stein might be understood to be advocating for the interdependence of theoretical and practical reason, insofar as “seeing” and “doing” recall the distinction between *theoria* (literally, “a looking at”) and *praxis*.

This stance is developed in *The Geographical History of America*, Stein’s most straightforwardly philosophical work, a long essay on the difference between what Stein terms “human mind” and “human nature.” *The Geographical History* was composed in the summer of 1935, soon after Stein returned to France from her wildly popular lecture tour in the U.S., made possible by the sudden fame and financial reward that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* had brought her, along with a promise from Random House to publish a book of hers a year (Mellow 417). Written

¹⁰⁵ Though it is well known to critics that Stein was a student of James, as I mentioned, her relation to Bergson has been less explored. A notable exception is Joseph Riddel’s chapter on Stein and Bergson in *The Turning Word*.

in the midst of this newfound security, as well as with new anxieties about the effects of fame and of writing for an audience,¹⁰⁶ *The Geographical History* raises questions about the nature of writing and of masterpieces over the course of a mediation on the more fundamental categories of identity and being. It bears intimately on the lecture “What are Master-Pieces and Why are There so Few of Them,” delivered a few months later in 1936, again at Oxford and Cambridge.

In his discerning introduction to the work, William Gass describes Stein’s insights as “Kantian” (39), and his assessment seems quite appropriate. Though Kantian epistemology may seem antithetical to Bergsonism, the distinction germane to Stein’s work—that is, the distinction between the intuition and the understanding—marks the site where Bergson still finds Kant’s philosophy useful, as it preserves an aspect of consciousness from the analytic operations of concept formation (*L’évolution créatrice* 207-208). Stein’s two organizing terms, “human nature” and “human mind,” can readily be understood to perpetuate a form of this Kantian distinction between the faculties of intuition and the understanding, in which intuition objects are “given to us,” or passively apprehended by the senses, while in the understanding “they are thought,” or actively organized by concepts (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 193).¹⁰⁷ For Stein, “human nature” draws on sensible cognition, and is that part of us generally engaged in the “business of living” (“Masterpieces” 88) in the sensory as well as the social world: it involves looking,

¹⁰⁶ In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein describes the effects of fame: “We saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting ... to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but always it does give me a little shock of recognition and non-recognition. It is one of the things most worrying in the subject of identity” (175)

¹⁰⁷ Kant begins the “Transcendental Logic” with this distinction: “Our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (the spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is thought in relation to that representation (as a mere determination of the mind)” (193).

doing, talking, playing tag, fighting, remembering, and recognizing. It gives rise to religion, propaganda, and politics (46); and it generally constitutes the realm of *doxa*, as it is made up of what “everybody says” and “everybody knows” (190-191). A uniquely human nature exists just as a dog or a squirrel nature exists, a distinctly human way of being “gregarious and solitary” (47), just as there is a different, canine or sciurine way of being gregarious and solitary. Distinct from human nature is the “human mind,” the seat of analysis and abstraction, whose provinces include geography, writing, and money. The human mind seems to be capable of schematizing and of working with symbolic values, in other words. It bows to the law of non-contradiction: “human mind can not do ... two things at once” (48); and it possesses an awareness of our constitutive finitude: “if nobody had to die how would there be room enough for any of us who now live to have lived. ... Human nature cannot know this. But the human mind can” (45).

The distinction between human mind and human nature, their overlapping and yet contradictory ways of seeing, are encapsulated and dramatized in the concept of geography. Stein suggests that for the human mind “the world is round”; yet for human nature, “the land on it is flat” (70). The difference seems to be a basic one between our knowledge of the world and our experience of it, until we add to the mix the fact that geographical representation also tends to be flat, drawing as it does “the straight lines on the map” (85). In fact, even globes would be “flat” in Stein’s conception of geography, insofar as what is at issue for her is the independence of knowledge from time and lived experience: “When you look at anything and you do not see it all in one plane, you do not see it with the human mind ... The human mind has neither identity nor time and when it sees anything has to look flat” (175). Stein considers what happens when we view a landscape from the window of an airplane:

Because the human mind knows what it knows and knowing what it knows it has nothing to do with seeing what it remembers, remember how the country looked as we passed over it, it made designs big designs like human nature draws them because it knows them without ever having seen them from above. (55)

Having barely elaborated on her distinction between mind and nature, Stein leaps to a scenario that complicates their distinction and raises the question of their resemblance and co-dependence. While geography may be a product of the human mind, and of the mind's capacity to produce knowledge by categorizing and systematizing, geographical representation resembles our phenomenal experience of landscapes viewed from above, an "above" that is in turn made possible by the technological developments advanced by the human mind. In other words, the conceptual products generated by the mind (maps, for example), resemble those that belong to the phenomenal experience of human nature (landscapes), while at the same time these products of the mind (airplanes) have the ability to transform our phenomenal experience itself.

Stein goes on to consider the lack of fear one experiences when flying, in what can readily be grasped as an allegory about abstraction:

When you climb on the land high human nature knows because by remembering it has been a dangerous thing to go higher and higher on the land which is where human nature was but now in an aeroplane human nature is nothing remembering is nothing no matter how many have been killed from up there it is not anything that is a memory, because if you are killed you do not remember no you do not, it is only on land where it is dangerous (5-56)

Human nature belongs to the land where its experiences are forged, and where its memory conveys a sense of danger, while the human mind has the capacity to transcend situations, which it surveys without memory or anticipation, with neither “tears” nor “fears” (65). The mind’s inability to remember or forget, which seems to be Stein’s way of describing the “timeless” time of abstraction, leads Stein to claim: “And so the human mind is like not being in danger but being killed” (56).

To the distinction between the human mind and human nature corresponds two divergent senses of time, the same as we saw earlier in *The Making of Americans*. Stein’s consideration of these different time-senses is explored in one of the repeated mantras of the essay: “what is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man” (50). Taken rhetorically, the question asserts that there is in fact no use, and becomes a statement about the radical disjunction between past and present (Whittier-Ferguson 122). Yet perhaps Stein poses the question in earnest—that is, literally—in order to contemplate the ways that the human mind and human nature are able or unable to apprehend this question of “use,” which is ultimately a question of the “use” of the past for the present, or of the possibility of a synthesis of time that would produce a genuinely temporal knowledge.

It turns out that neither the mind nor human nature alone can properly pose or think this question. “Human nature can not know that there is no use in being a little boy if he is to grow up to be a man” (51), perhaps because the time of human nature is the unbroken time of living and doing, again, what Stein refers to as the “prolonged present,” as opposed to the “continuous present” of a static composition (“Composition” 31). In Bergson’s terms, this would be “le présent réel, concret, vécu ... [qui] occupe nécessairement une durée” (*Matière et mémoire* 83). Human nature can remember and recognize itself in the past, but is so absorbed in the practical use of the past for present action that it fails to be sufficiently perturbed by Stein’s question.

Initially the human mind cannot think through the question either; but Stein goes on to write: “Now let the human mind think what it is to be a little boy and when the human mind has thought what it is to be a little boy the human mind will know that there is no use in being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man” (51). This suggests that the human mind, though incapable of thinking temporal continuity, can at least register a temporal disjunction, insofar as it is capable of analytical thinking and “contact,” that is, of breaking down the continuum of time into discrete sections, and of juxtaposing the elements of its analysis. I would suggest that the concept of a “geographical history”—just as that of a history of kinds in *The Making of Americans*—is so important to Stein because it is her way of asking the question of the possibility of a real intersection of these two time-senses, of a cooperation between the felt duration of human nature and the “flat” or spatial understanding of the human mind.

Interestingly enough, the question of “use” also appears in Bergson’s work at precisely the point at which Bergson would pose a challenge to Kant’s critical philosophy. Discussing the failures of both empiricism and dogmatism to unify discrete phenomena, he argues that the only response to this failure would appear to be a critical one:

[Si]i la métaphysique n’est qu’une construction, il y a plusieurs métaphysiques également vraisemblables, qui se réfutent par conséquent les unes les autres, et le dernier mot restera à une philosophie critique, qui tient toute connaissance pour relative et le fond des choses pour inaccessible à l’esprit. (*Matière et mémoire* 109)

In place of the limitations he sees imposed by critical philosophy, Bergson envisions a different enterprise, a transcendental inquiry that would at the same time refuse the forms of a transcendental (that is, Kantian) subject, as Bergson believes these forms to

be themselves surreptitiously imported from experience. He proposes instead “d’aller chercher l’expérience à sa source, ou plutôt au-dessus de ce *tournant* décisif où, s’infléchissant dans le sens de notre utilité, elle devient proprement l’expérience *humaine*” (ibid.). In other words, to question the “use” (*utilité*) of phenomenal experience for a distinctly human existence marks, for Bergson, the site of a transcendental inquiry. Perhaps it does for Stein as well. Here I am in agreement with Jennifer Ashton, who suggests that in her experimental writing, Stein aims “not to improve her representation of experience, but rather to construct the logical conditions of its possibility” (Ashton 33). In so doing, she makes available another kind of experience to the reader, an experience of the artwork in the form of an aesthetic education.

Human mind and human nature have distinctly different ways of seeing. In “Composition as Explanation,” it might seem as if Stein distinguishes between “what is seen” and “the thing we are looking at” (26), or between appearances and things-in-themselves, but she demonstrates her thinking to be more complicated on this point in *The Geographical History of America*, in a way that sheds light on the earlier essay. In *The Geographical History* she declares: “The world as we see it looks like this./ They used to think that the world was there as we see it but this is not so the world is there as it is human nature is there as it is and the human mind. The human mind knows this, that everything is there as it is” (74-5). In the first sentence, Stein can be read as announcing the primacy of the phenomenal image, the importance of what the world “looks like” to us, as distinct from “what it is.” The non-coincidence between the two does not seem to be especially troubling to Stein, who does not describe a fundamental opposition of being to appearance, so much as indicate a displacement of the one by the other, and a concatenation, by means of the syntax of her sentence: “the world is there as it is human nature is there as it is and the human mind.”

Furthermore, she concludes that this displacement of being is registered only by the human mind—“the human mind knows this, that everything is there as it is”—and not human nature.

What Stein has to say about the nature of “masterpieces” is directly related to her meditations on these different ways of seeing and knowing. She heads a chapter: “How looking at it does not make it different from what it looks like” (70); and offers, by way of explanation: “When anything looks like it is and it is land and anybody writing or painting says it is that no one needs to remember that. ... That is why they make it like that not because they look at it but because it is like that” (ibid.). Here she may seem to contradict the remarks we examined in the previous paragraph, suggesting that there are certain times when being and appearance do coincide, times when a thing in fact “looks like is.” But perhaps Stein is instead making an observation about the claims of art. She links being and appearance both to the assertion of the artist, to the moment when “anybody writing or painting says it is that.” “No one needs to remember” implies that the reader or viewer is not expected to recall his own subjective impressions of a thing and weigh them against the artist’s, because the function of a masterpiece is not, or not merely, to depict the artist’s divergent subjective impressions, those impressions forged by her particular human nature, but to present those impressions in the form of a universal claim, a claim that would appeal to the human mind.

Stein’s penchant for hyphenating the word “master-piece” is perhaps suggestive of this dual function of the artwork, of the impulse to mastery and objectivity in its knowledge-claim on the one hand, and of the sustenance it draws from the piecemeal elements of a subjective perception on the other. Stein employs the word “piece” by itself a few times in *The Geographical History*, referring to “a piece of a day,” or “a piece of nature” (58). “A piece is only a little way” (70), she

writes in the context of her distinction between the world's being round and the land on its being flat, suggesting that the partiality of human nature's perspective is what creates the illusion of the earth's flatness. In the line just before it, she writes, "when anyone ... looks at it all it can know that human nature is not the human mind. Once as a piece. Or even twice or more as a piece" (ibid.). Perhaps this is a way of intimating, again, that human mind and human nature are not "of a piece." Or perhaps it means that even if we were able to "look at it all," to see all of the land at once, for example, this would still not amount to knowing the world, because the knowledge obtained by the mind is not equal to the total of an infinite series of fragmented perspectives. A "master-piece," on the other hand, would perhaps not abandon the partiality of its perspective, but would make its appeal to mastery from that very perspective.

If masterpieces for Stein involve the elevation of a subjective perspective to an objective claim, that is, if they establish a kind of impersonality of subjective impressions, they would have much in common with what we witnessed in Proust in the previous chapter. There, we saw that the sensory self was subject to a thousand deaths at the hands of an intellectual self, and that the novel itself stood as a kind of tomb or testament to these deaths at the same time as it progressively accomplished them. Stein, too, is deeply concerned with relations of life and death to writing. In the years surrounding *The Geographical History of America*, she made known her fondness for detective fiction, publishing "Why I Like Detective Stories" in *Harpers* in 1937, and trying her own hand at the genre with the novella *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* in 1933. In "What are Masterpieces," Stein elaborates on the appeal of detective fiction, calling it "the only really modern novel form":

It is very curious but the detective story which is you might say the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of

human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins. (87)

In “getting rid of human nature” by killing it off and replacing it with what Stein calls “detection,” crime fiction is intimately related to the very nature of writing itself, in Stein’s view. On writing in general, she asserts, “And so we come to what is really what we write what we write is really a crime story” (*Geographical History* 79). Writing differs from speech: “what you say is not the same as what you write” (78); and she explains: “Think of what anybody does they read what is or has been written. They do not read what is or has been said. Even on the radio it is written it is not said” (79). Stein imagines that writing is not bound to the living presence of the writer in the way that speaking is, which is “why anybody can go on being able to read anything that has been written just as naturally as when it is or was written” (97). The human mind, or our capacity for abstraction, is the part of us that writes, because it is what survives this loss of presence. Hence its relationship to death: “The human mind,” she continues, “is the mind that writes what any human mind years after or years before can read, thousands of years or no years it makes no difference” (108). Human nature, on the other hand, is what does all of the talking: “Now human nature human nature is just the same as any animal nature and so it has nothing to do with the human mind. Any animal can talk any animal can be but not any animal can write” (ibid.). Being continuous with our human nature, “talking has nothing to do with creation” (“Masterpieces” 84).

Stein’s investment in aligning writing with the human mind does not entail a wholesale rejection of life or human nature, but rather relies on a transfer of the values of life and activity from lived experience to the written page. In “Poetry and Grammar,” one of the lectures given on her American tour, she evaluates different

kinds of writing, parts of speech, and marks of punctuation according to how “lively” they are, writing, for example: “the words in plays written in poetry are more lively than the same words written by the same poet in other kinds of poetry (209); and, “verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive” (214). Commas, by contrast, which Stein obviously does not favor, “are servile they have no life of their own” (218). Worse yet, commas diminish the activity of the reader: “a comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it” (220). And like many of her contemporaries, Stein advertised her rejection of the aesthetics of the previous era by asserting that in the nineteenth century “words no longer lived ... phrases became the thing” (“What is English Literature” 43).

Her insistence on “liveliness” is bound up with the perceived threat that recognition poses to art. Stein introduces a series of mini-dramas halfway through *The Geographical History* in order to raise what she terms “the question of identity” (99). “I am I because my little dog knows me,” she quips in a paraphrase of a nursery rhyme, and a line repeated frequently in the second half of the essay, which became the basis of her marionette puppet play, “Identity a Poem,” performed in 1936. This line suggests that identity is constructed in recognition, or more precisely that the specular nature of self-relation is supported by the animal-like recognition of an other.¹⁰⁸ “Identity is recognition,” Stein asserts, “you know who you are because you and others remember anything about yourself (“Masterpieces” 84). “What are Masterpieces” condenses and clarifies Stein’s thoughts on this point. She expounds:

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly enough, the nursery rhyme was also quoted in an assigned text in one of Stein’s philosophy classes at Radcliffe, Josiah Royce’s *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Bridgman 242n). Royce uses the rhyme to illustrate that “self-recognition ... include[s] the binding of fact to fact in your experience,” as part of his explanation of Kant’s notion of the transcendental unity of apperception (Royce 128).

What are master-pieces and why after all are there so few of them. ...
All this summer I meditated and wrote about this subject and it finally
came to be a discussion of the relation of human nature and the human
mind and identity. The thing one gradually comes to find out is that
one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything.
(ibid.)

While identity is constructed when “you and others remember anything about yourself,” creation is without identity, because it takes place in the absence of memory. And most importantly, because it is aligned with activity, with “the act of doing anything.” Stein continues: “creatively speaking the little dog knowing that you are you and your recognising that he knows, that is what destroys creation” (84). The ability to create oneself without being beholden to the past is in part at stake here, a concern no doubt very present for Stein in the face of her newfound fame: “At any moment when you are you you are without the memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for purposes of creating you” (85-86).

But above all, the question of identity bears on artistic creation. In the domain of art, “recognition” threatens to intervene in the relation of the writer to his audience—“One of the things I discovered in lecturing,” Stein says, “was that gradually one ceased to hear what one said one heard what the audience hears one say, that is the reason that oratory is practically never a master-piece” (86)—as well as in the relation of “the act of creation to the subject the creator uses to create that thing” (85). In what sounds like a typically high-modernist rejection of realism, Stein discusses the ostensible “subject” of art:

[T]here is always the same subject there are the things you see and
there are human beings and animal beings and everybody you might

say since the beginning of time knows ... everything about these things. After all any woman in any village or men either if you like or even children know as much of human psychology as any writer that ever lived ... and it is not this knowledge that makes master-pieces. (85)

It is not the subject matter that makes a masterpiece, in other words, but the arrangement of this matter in a formally unique composition.

Recollection, meanwhile, kills creation: “Any of you when you write you try to remember what you are about to write and you will see immediately how lifeless the writing becomes” (89). Recollection must not intervene in the process of composition, which is conceived as a immanent process of creation and discovery. Immanence is key, for a masterpiece must be a “a thing made by being made,” not “a thing prepared” (“Composition” 27). In an interview conducted on the last day of her American lecture tour, Stein explains to a fellow writer:

You will write ... if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in thought or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking. It will come if it is there and if you will let it come, and if you have anything you will get a sudden *creative recognition*. (Preston 154; italics mine)

With this passage, we seem to have come full circle. On the one hand, Stein wants to divorce masterpieces from human nature so as to situate them outside of the continuous time of lived experience, and beyond the received ways of looking, thinking and talking characterized as what “everybody knows” and “everybody says.” Writing inaugurates its own time (it is without “beginning and ending”), its own arrangement (“flatness”), and its own intentions (it is without a “motive” except for

what can be reconstructed from the crime-scene of the text). A masterpiece can not be anticipated, and the question exists of whether it can even really be recognized by an audience, or if it only risks being re-constituted in misrecognition: “after the audience begins,” Stein laments, “naturally they create something that is they create you” (“Masterpieces” 95). On the other hand, in the passage above, Stein refers to a “sudden creative recognition” that a writer experiences with respect to her own work in progress, a different kind of recognition that presumably does not impede, but fosters, creation. Here again, the values of activity associated with human nature do not seem to be rejected so much as reconstituted within the artwork.

“But what can a master-piece be about” Stein asks. “[M]ostly it is about identity and all it does and in being so it must not have any” (91). Moments like these where Stein complicates the relation between art and identity, or mind and nature, prove to be much more revealing than those where she draws stricter divisions. Here she contends that masterpieces have a more nebulous relation to human nature’s way of thinking than a wholesale refusal. “It is not extremely difficult not to have identity,” she writes, “but it is extremely difficult the knowing not having identity. ... that it is not impossible is proved by the existence of master-pieces which are just that,” she writes (90). The image of a different form of knowledge emerges in these lines, one that refuses the rigidity of concepts forged in experience and according to categories that are useful to action (“identity”); but that at the same time aspires to a knowledge of this refusal, and attempts to use the “pieces” of experience towards this new knowledge. I would not suggest that Stein advocates for a heightened self-consciousness of the artwork, but rather the opposite. She continues by offering an illustration: “I was just thinking about anything and in thinking about anything I saw something. In seeing that thing shall we see it without it turning into identity, the moment is not a moment and the sight is not the thing seen and yet it is” (91). It is as

if Stein would suspend the process of concept formation, that operation of the human mind, while holding on to its constituent elements, retaining the integrity of the process as a living activity, but distributing its elements across a static mental landscape. Similarly, aesthetic composition is explanation (from the Latin *planus*, meaning “flat”), because it flattens experience. This landscape, plain, or composition becomes the site of a new meditation, where “each part is as important as the whole” (“Transatlantic” 98) because the meditation’s conclusions are not given in advance, and the relation of mind and nature is not determined but complicated and displayed for the sake of a new aesthetic experience.

APPENDIX

« Seuls, s'élevant du niveau de la plaine et comme perdus en rase campagne, montaient vers le ciel les deux clochers de Martinville. Bientôt nous en vîmes trois: venant se placer en face d'eux par une volte hardie, un clocher retardataire, celui de Vieuxvicq, les avait rejoints. Les minutes passaient, nous allions vite et pourtant les trois clochers étaient toujours au loin devant nous, comme trois oiseaux posés sur la plaine, immobiles et qu'on distingue au soleil. Puis le clocher de Vieuxvicq s'écarta, prit ses distances, et les clochers de Martinville restèrent seuls, éclairés par la lumière du couchant que même à cette distance, sur leurs pentes, je voyais jouer et sourire. Nous avons été si longs à nous rapprocher d'eux, que je pensais au temps qu'il faudrait encore pour les atteindre quand, tout d'un coup, la voiture ayant tourné, elle nous déposa à leurs pieds; et ils s'étaient jetés si rudement au-devant d'elle, qu'on n'eut que le temps d'arrêter pour ne pas se heurter au porche. Nous poursuivîmes notre route; nous avons déjà quitté Martinville depuis un peu de temps et le village après nous avoir accompagnés quelques secondes avait disparu, que restés seuls à l'horizon à nous regarder fuir, ses clochers et celui de Vieuxvicq agitaient encore en signe d'adieu leurs cimes ensoleillées. Parfois l'un s'effaçait pour que les deux autres pussent nous apercevoir un instant encore; mais la route changea de direction, ils virèrent dans la lumière comme trois pivots d'or et disparurent à mes yeux. Mais, un peu plus tard, comme nous étions déjà près de Combray, le soleil étant maintenant couché, je les aperçus une dernière fois de très loin qui n'étaient plus que comme trois fleurs peintes sur le ciel au-dessus de la ligne basse des champs. Ils me faisaient penser aussi aux trois jeunes filles d'une légende, abandonnées dans une solitude où tombait déjà l'obscurité; et tandis que nous nous éloignons au galop, je les vis timidement chercher leur chemin et après quelques gauches trébuchements de leurs nobles silhouettes, se serrer les uns contre les autres, glisser l'un derrière l'autre, ne

plus faire sur le ciel encore rose qu'une seule forme noire, charmante et résignée, et s'effacer dans la nuit. »

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