

Thinking about literary thought

Literary theory has aroused much dismissal, a good deal of infatuation, and a growing number of misunderstandings. Some declare it “theoretical terrorism,” while others try to restore in it the “common sense” of a “reading ego” trying to become a “popular ego,” and try to convince themselves that “nothing interesting has been written in the last 20 years.” To these rather restrained opinions, one must add the unremitting efforts of the media but also of academia — these powers and institutions are decidedly united — who aim to ridicule and discredit for ever more literary theory’s encroachment, or attempted encroachment, of its authority on literature. It may seem paradoxical that such a sparing, abstract, or even, as they say, insignificant activity should elicit such an... eroticization. Why so much passion for such an elusive object? We must look back to the beginnings of theoretical thought in the area of arts and literature, in order to attempt to uncover the reasons for this apparent anomaly.

I would put forth two sources of literary theory. The first goes back to philosophy and to its metamorphoses since the end of the 19th century. The second goes back to the changes in how the imaginary is perceived, a change contemporaneous with the transformation of philosophy and of esthetics. But it seems to me that there is not enough emphasis placed on this second source of literary theory: we find it difficult to evaluate our century, with all its profound upheavals, while, on the eve of the third millenium, still more are promised that echo the past. I would first mention the following upheavals, to which I will return later: first of all Nietzsche, quoting Jean Paul: “God is dead”; second the words of Mallarmé: “We have touched poetry”; and I would ask you to remember that both these statements go hand in hand.

1. Among antecedents

Although a theory of literature has existed since the time of Plato and Aristotle (and therefore a theory of genres, style, author, model and imitation, and so forth), literary theory in the modern — and disputed — sense of the term is dependant on German philosophy and esthetics at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, and, more fundamentally, on Husserl’s phenomenological revolution.

In his *Principles of Art History* (1915), Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) abandons the exploration of singular cases, to uncover instead general traits in the evolution of art. The object of his analysis is not the *expression*, but rather the abstract *quality*, above all with respect to the following statement: the quality of style which is self-evident, the form of vision common to all artists belonging to a similar period, and a quality formulated as a “language about art” (*Kunstsprache*). This language is formed based on binary oppositions of mutually exclusive categories (hence: linear versus pictorial, two-dimensional versus three-dimensional, closed versus open, and so forth). But, far from being universal categories like those of Kant, they depend on the historical periods being contemplated (Renaissance, baroque, and Gothic do not belong to the same categories). Progressively, Wölfflin’s thinking moves toward an assimilation of the problems of art with those of language and style.

At the same time as, but independently of Wölfflin, Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) discovered the essence of the “symbol,” which expresses the invariable that underpins variation. All “cultural forms” (mythology, art, religion, as well as science) are reconciled inasmuch as they occupy a “symbolic function” that they each execute differently. The primacy and the extension of the symbolic function, which covers all phenomena and which demonstrates meaning in the midst of sensibility, is not however negligent of context: the context constitutes the symbolic form, which, thus described, dispenses reality.

But it was Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who founded phenomenology, inspired by his initial work on the epistemology of mathematical thought, and who appears to be the most radical instigator of the so-called “theoretical” approach in the areas of art and literature, as well as in the “social sciences”. In his *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (1913), and then in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929) and *Logical Investigations*, he abandons the distinction between “form” and “content,” denouncing the criteria upon which it is based as “psychological”. Instead, he proposes a “logical” thinking in which each “given,” which must be “distributed in the region of the being”, is a result of experience. In other words, the irreducible “how” must be “contemplated”. And so, “purely logical” studies of this “contemplation” are precisely those where we see that the word “logic” is Husserl’s description of the Greek *logos*. A true turning-point in philosophical thinking, comparable even to that of Plato, Husserl’s phenomenology illustrates the essence of “form of consciousness” as opposed to “matter of consciousness”, discusses the distinction between formal laws and material laws, and re-establishes the “logical unity of the content of thought, that is to say the unity of theory”.

We could establish, although I will not do it here, the phenomenological relationship of research in *Literaturwissenschaft* in Germany, which is dedicated to the study of literary as a carrier of specific content. From Vossler to Steinthal, Spet, Staiger and Spitzer, the particularities of poetic language as an expression of scientific thought are studied, moving from “dialectical stylis-

tics" to "poetic forms" of discourse and of genres, distinguishing "interior form", and separating the "signs of things" from the "signs of meaning," and so forth.

The development of Saussure's (1857–1913) theory of general linguistics, as well as of his work on semiology, but also the works of Hjelmslev (1899–1965), which tended more closely toward phenomenology, would later aid in identifying that significant and specific value attributed to literary formality, which had emerged from the work of the German theorists, to the system of language itself. Produced only in draft form by Saussure and by Hjelmslev, it was in Russian formalism that this linguistically inspired theoretical current was most clearly realized. In fact, the turning point carried out by Russian formalism pinpointed, in substance, binary structures in poetic and narrative thought, to the extent that they were a revival of the phonological duality which is a constituent part of the language system. B. Tomachevsky's book *Theory of literature*, written in 1925, is the most systematic version of this, and the main protagonists were thereafter known to all: Chklovsky, Vinogradov, Tynianov, and R. Jakobson. T. Todorov edited in France a compilation of Tomachevsky's works (*Théorie de la littérature*, "Tel Quel" series, Seuil, 1966): this was a starting-point for an extension of Lévy-Strauss' structuralism — which had until then been applied to genealogical structures and to mythology — to literary texts and to other esthetic objects (music, cinema, photography, and so forth).

Without trying to be exhaustive, I feel it is necessary to add to these German and Russian "schools" R. Wellek and A. Warren's 1949 "Theory of Literature." Seen as a branch of general and comparative literature, it is a reflection on the conditions of literature, literary criticism and literary history, and is described as "literary theory" in order to distinguish it from the "theory of literature" more easily identified with formalism. More empirical than the theoretical variations from the Continent, American "new criticism" merges historical and formal methods, and owes a great debt to comparative literature.

I will not delve further into this (inevitably schematic) reminder of the antecedents of modern and French literary theory. As essential as they may be, they do not explain its recent explosion in France and abroad, and, alone, they carry the risk of forming a scientific and positivist isolation that would be unable to reveal the characteristics of the initially postulated literary thought, instead locking it up in a universalizing logical grid.

Another condition of the research we are undertaking today has come to light, adding itself to what has already been described: we forget that this investigation concerning *form as thought*, and not as a more or less secondary expression, which describes literary theory, is contemporaneous with a *unprecedented readjustment of the imaginary experience* in modernity. It is a readjustment which has placed habits of reception in a difficult position: it has stimulated a recourse to new approaches to these "languages", to these sur-

prising “forms”, and it has literally turned upside down classical rationality, as well as moral standards and ideologies.

To sum things up, the literary experience of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century appeared as the singular path for thinking about the subject in the world, calling into question the boundaries between conscience and language. Skimming these boundaries, that is to say these psychosocial pathologies, the imagination, thus deployed, presents itself as the more or less intentional accomplice in the Freudian revolution that discovers, at the same time, the unconscious. More radically still, this new regime of the imaginary appears as a rival to the inner experience, while at the same time trying to change social structures by modifying the relationship between the talking being and meaning, inasmuch as this relationship deeply codifies the social contract. After the *sacred*, where men celebrated meaning through rituals that juxtaposed sacrificed substances against that which is beyond forbidden, the sensible against the significant; after the *religious* which meditates on meaning as a dynamic between the forbidden and the transgression in the subject’s formative revolt in the face of the Father; the *modern imaginary* confronted Meaning, which constitutes human conscience and social morality, challenging it under pressure from the Real, which forever remains impossible, but which the modern Imaginary attempts to explore by inscribing undisclosable truths.

2. The modern regime of the Imaginary

Because it is necessary to simplify things, I ask you to consider the following: in the last century, perhaps a little longer, an event has taken place which has profoundly marked the European literary experience: the meeting of literature and the impossible. Initiated by German romanticism, marked by the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and even the tragic lucidity of Hölderlin, and clearly targeted by the journal *Athenäum* (Berlin, 1878), this bringing together of literature and the impossible took on its most radical form in the French language. Literature relinquished its role of beautiful language, of seductive beauty, of religion’s younger sister. In making itself the explorer of each verb’s resource — what to say? how to say it? what does “to say” mean? to make and to unmake meaning? — literature first enters into a radical debate, or into a face-to-face meeting (similarity, then dissociation) with religion and philosophy. Literature thus explores the impasses of the conscience and associates itself with madness. Finally, it collides with the resistance of social reality, not to disprove it but instead to no longer reflect it, and rather to disprove first of all the imaginary itself, and thus literature in aid of social reality — we are familiar with the tragedy of the poet who becomes a businessman, as well as that of the “politically committed” poet. Finally, literature demands another status for the imaginary: a path to truth and to transformation, both subjective and social. In France,

this encounter of literature and the impossible experienced three stages: the first was that of Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Mallarmé; the second, that of Surrealism; the third was that of *Tel Quel* (1960–1982).

A. For Rimbaud, I will remind you of some of his poetry in *A Season in Hell*, “Delirium II: Alchemy of the Word” (1870): “Never any hopes, / No *orientur*. / Science and patience, / The suffering if sure”. And these lines, also from *A Season in Hell*, “Farewell” (1873):

I who called myself magus or angel, exempt from all morality, I am thrown back to the earth, with a duty to find, and rough reality to embrace! Peasant!
Was I wrong? Could charity be the sister of death for me?
At least I will ask forgiveness for having fed on lies. Let us go now.
But not a friendly hand! Where can I find help?
Yes, at least the new hour is very harsh. [...] We must be absolutely modern.
[...] I saw the hell of women down there. [...]

And finally, in *Illuminations*, “Morning of Drunkenness” (1871): “Elegance, science, violence! [...] We assert you, method! [...] Behold the age of Murderers”. The *method*, you will understand, is violently outraged.

We must be absolutely modern, in this age of Murderers, for I saw the hell of women down there: this is a possible montage of Rimbaud’s words. We could make others. But for me this one seems to reverberate with the reading that I will undertake of the Surrealists: the sudden acknowledgement of an antinomy between society and poetry, and more still between a certain spirituality (which both the family and Claudel would not cease to rediscover, or rather to impose on him the most conventional forms) and the affirmation of an elegant and cruel “method”, which is none other than a certain way of thinking beyond judgment, of thinking with one’s body and one’s tongue. It is known that the experience of this rupture would lead Rimbaud to abandon poetic writing — the traveler would find in Abyssinia an activity as exotic as it was insignificant, and we are free to think that he ended up either repudiating the search for “rough reality to be embraced”, or else on the contrary that he pursued it in silence. Nevertheless, before poetry confronted that particular impossibility, which was the renunciation of imaginary formulations, another impossibility unfurled itself magnificently in *Illuminations*: listening to that boundary-state where thought has recourse to the senses; not to the “good sense” which certain people think encapsulates sensibility, but rather, on the contrary, “to the disturbance of all senses”, which is, in reality (if you think about it), the sign of thinking human beings, and which leads to the clarity of a dazzling language, rich and unusual, that one must indeed call an “illumination”. It is the *fold* where a “soul” or, in other words, a subject who has touched in meaning and sensations his own contours, escapes in an exteriority that we can term a “voyage”, a “path” or a “being” — but Rimbaud distrusts these “lies” too much to content himself with these conciliatory clichés of what appears to him to be, strictly speaking,

madness. Listen to him — there is no surrealism in these lines, a passage from *Illuminations* entitled “Lives”: “I am a far more deserving inventor than all those who went before me; a musician, in fact, who found something resembling the key of love”. [The union of music and the key of love would also appear later in the works of the Surrealists.] “I expect to become a very wicked fool”. [We find ourselves here at the boundary of silence, but Rimbaud never ceases to compose with it.] “And now that I am so worthy of this torture, let me fervently gather in the superhuman promise made to my created body and soul. This promise, this madness!” [The ability to change styles in a new illumination is linked, if it exists at all, with dementia.] “Elegance, science, violence! [...] We assert you, method! I am not forgetting that yesterday you glorified each of our ages. I believe in that poison. I can give all of my existence each day”. The exhortation, the exaltation, the dementia, the elegance, the science, the violence, these are the things that should give access to the new style.

And, from Lautréamont, at about the same time (1868, *Maldoror*; 1870, *Poems*):

It is time to apply the brakes to my inspiration and to pause for a while by the wayside, as when one looks upon the vagina of a woman. [...]

I shall set down my thoughts in orderly manner, by means of a plan without confusion.

Would the logic of the physical body and of musicality open another scene, at the very heart of the judgment that trivializes us in our social lives: another humanity, a “poetic” one so to speak, but which in reality would be another logic?

Lautréamont is the explorer of that path, another precursor to the Surrealists. Some of you are familiar with my reflections on Lautréamont in *La Révolution du langage poétique*, and I will admit to you that I am excited to revive this relationship with *Maldoror* and *Poetry*. They express the same necessity asserted by Rimbaud — to leave behind ornamental poetry, to combat romanticism, Parnassus, symbolism, empty rhetoric, the blind embellishment of pleasure or of pain, and to confront the experience of literature using philosophy and science. That led, in Lautréamont’s *Poetry*, to a sort of writing in forms: forms, in effect, that aspire to a scientific and positivist exactness influenced by Auguste Comte — albeit in an ironic and blasphemous way — and that hark back to classical philosophy, because it is the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, and Vauvenargues that the poet lightly knocks off balance in order to give them a more radical, more diabolical sense, more rebellious against classical enunciation.

The confrontation with the other is carried out on two fronts: on the one hand a rewriting of classicism and rationalism in order to unfold the tissues of the mind; on the other hand an exploration of the other sex as such. It is not only the violence, the unbearable, the disgust, but also the fascination and,

from there, the mobilization of language to take into account these states of ambivalent passion. Here then are some excerpts from the *Poetry*: “Great thoughts come from reason! [...] You who enter here, abandon all despair. [...] Each time I read Shakespeare it seems to me that I am dissecting the brain of a jaguar”.

Lautréamont invites us to enter into the conflict, to locate the irreconcilable, to demonstrate the logic of violence and of ferocity that is the flip side of beautiful language, of the literary beauty associated with Shakespeare; of a violent act: to tear thought to pieces, thought which is the supreme power, to penetrate into this tyranny of the intellect, of which Kant had indicated the force, and which Lautréamont presents using the formidable and derisory image of the “brain of a jaguar.”

This claim of radical thinking goes hand in hand with a penetration into the mystery of the “normal” that is the taboo of sexuality with the embellishment of the sexual act. And Lautréamont joins his revolt of logic together with a descent, through the female and the vagina, into the derisory hell of the species, of our animal nature: “It is time to apply the brakes to my inspiration and to pause for a while by the wayside, as when one looks upon the vagina of a woman”.

If I have quoted from these two authors (Rimbaud and Lautréamont), chosen from among others, it has been to point out two elements of this meeting of literature and the impossible, which *Tel Quel* took up again, and which I will revisit in a few moments. On the one hand, literature in the face of a classical philosophical design, which one could almost call classicistic; on the other hand, the confrontation of literary enunciation and poetic transgression with the feminine side of man and the feminine of side of woman. This in fact refers to a transsubjective reality that is more and more difficult to define. So much so that we look for it from a perspective which for some may seem dreamlike, but which may be the very foundation of things: in the realm of Chinese ideograms and their battle between gesture and sign, between reality and meaning.

B. The second meeting between literature and the impossible was that of Surrealism. In taking up Rimbaud and Lautréamont’s message, the encounter knew not only the anti-lyrical rage and the fear of an objective discourse — which, as you know, exasperated the bourgeois — but also the voyage toward the impossible that I mentioned earlier, with its two variant forms: the feminine and the real. It was a voyage, however, which got bogged down in the cult of the providential woman (“the future of man is woman” being one of the most religious impasses of that misunderstanding) and in the adherence to a providential institution: for Aragon, it was the Communist Party. The fact remains that, from Breton to Aragon, with and beyond the war in which they fought, the awareness that *literature is anti-thought* was affirmed. That the writing dissolves the apparent coherence of the argument and opens up the dynamics of thought: the *anti-thought*, in order to better demonstrate that this

writing-thought presents a repressed logic, in opposition to the period of calm of metaphysical thought.

French literature is too used to beautiful language and too afraid of reasoning for one to dare advance with impunity on its territory, even as far as to consider that writing can be — not always, as bookstores are full of examples to the contrary, but it does happen — an act of thought. The surrealist revolt seems to me a radical one, insofar as it tried to describe the untenable nature of that variation of thought that human beings accomplish by writing against repression and standard. When Aragon affirms repeatedly what he calls the “will of the novel”, let us not forget the profession of faith in *Paris Peasant* (1924–1926): “What concerns me is metaphysics”. The “will of the novel” is a continuation — and, we could demonstrate, a mutation — of metaphysics when metaphysics is tuned in to poetry and to the senses. In paying too much attention to the “new world”, which the surrealists predicted would be a social world — it is, in fact, an aspect of the project, and I will come back to this — we have above all underestimated the philosophical subversion represented by a writing that opposes “action” and “art” at the same time. Nevertheless, the modernity of that project is both indisputable and shocking. At the end of this century, even more clearly than during the surrealist period, we know that a rationality based on action does not exhaust the potentialities of the being.

The surrealist revolt took action first of all against a world where “action was not the sister of dreams”, according to the words of Baudelaire. A world that was opposed simultaneously to contemplative thought and pragmatic reasoning, to explore that other realm that Freud had investigated since the end of the previous century. There is a thought at the boundary of that which is thinkable: an experience of language liberated from the shackles of a judgmental conscience gives access to this thought and gives evidence of its existence. It is perhaps a matter of another world (of thought) that modifies the (real) world.

The surrealist revolt calls for a new way of thinking that shatters the essence of thought: the poetry of the surrealists confirms a refusal of insignificant poetry, of ornamental poetry, and a refusal of the “pohème”: “Attention [...] and then rhyme, syntax, and the grotesque”, write Breton and Éluard who, with Apollinaire, want to “touch the essence of the verb”. It is a question of continuing an investigation that consists of rejecting the ornamental, the poetic lace, the “pohème” to invent, from the perspective of the “scientific” or “experimental” ambition of precursors, the “event poem”. It is what would develop in subsequent years in the form of a *happening*, with the participation of the audience, the participants, the readers acting as subjects, as bodies, as atoms in play, in a given place. “Lyricism is the development of a protest against the sentiment of reality” (Breton) we still read in his *Notes on Poetry*. Let us be realistic and bear in mind those things that surround us, but to better twist our necks at ordinary reality! Surrealism will not let go of the fine line between poetry and reality. The “[...]”

transubstantiation of each thing into a miracle [...]” — that was the objective of the new poetry. Such is Aragon’s proposal in his *Treatise on Style* (1927), in harmony both with Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* and with the writings of Proust, who asked that the written word be made flesh through transubstantiation, the novel thus also becoming a physical experience. It was of course, to begin with, a question of achieving a sort of illumination, or fantastic state, through the cult of writing: from writing as a privileged, or even exclusive, act, to *anti*-thought. “I belonged, then, from an early age, to that zoological species of writers for whom thoughts are formed through writing”, wrote Aragon in his belated preface, written in 1964, to *The Libertine* (1924), acknowledging that there are no other solutions to thought or to life, except writing; that only writing can legitimately rise up against watered-down opinion and art: that only writing is a revolt in aid of the miraculous and of the capture of a thought without any utilitarian compromise.

An intense sexuality is called for to support the language of enchantment so that it may rebel against the French language — obviously imaginary — perceived as rational, dull, resistant to enchantment. The French language is a “language of cashiers, precise and inhuman”, complained Aragon in his *Treatise on Style*, before then proposing to create a new one using automatic writing, accounts of dreams, collages, and fragments. Eroticism was then mobilized to provoke the unusual and to inject new life into the imaginary. Such was the goal of *La Défense de l’infini* (1923–1927).

We thus arrive at this cascading, visual definition of verbal style, or of thinking about writing, of which the writer is but “second-hand”: “I call style the accent that takes second-hand a man given the waves by him echoed of the symbolic ocean that universally mines the earth by metaphor”. We can understand by this that style opens up language in such a way that each individual, each given man is the representative of the symbolic ocean, of the infinite nature of language to which we are led, if we really bear in mind the confrontation with the ephemeral, with humour, and with images. For the poet, these phenomena are not pretexts which open “an unending revolt”, to be further translated as metaphors. And also to insist on accent, on music, on what I call semiotics, therefore on the unique experience which instills an insurmountable sensibility in community usage of language (of the universal “waves” which mine the “earth”).

C. What stands out in my mind about *Tel Quel* is the still invisible third aspect of the meeting between literature and the impossible, and in which recent “literary theory” can be found. This aspect is still nearly invisible for almost the entire media world. Why? Because it is perhaps radical in other ways. And because it is not reclaimed by institutions (religious, partisan, secular, communist, academic, and so forth), it being understood that it is precisely this act of reclaiming that renders an experience visible, that renders visible the experiences of rupture; without this reclaiming these experiences of rupture would continue on outside the mainstream. Why is it radical?

Because we have taken on the legacy of the predecessors: the exhaustion of beautiful language, the desire to irradiate “universal reporting” (Mallarmé), gossip, popular literature. But, in addition, we have confronted that experience more clearly still with the history of philosophy, religion, and psychoanalysis. Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Freud — but also Augustine, Saint Bernard, Saint Thomas, Duns Scotus, and many others — became privileged references at the same level as Joyce, Proust, Mallarmé, Artaud, and Céline. *Tel Quel* was seen as a laboratory for reading and interpretation. Academics! some cried out. Terrorists! Accused the lazy, backing away. In these confrontations with philosophers, theologians or the writers mentioned above, it was a question of testing how far literature could go as a voyage to the end of the night. To the end of the night as a limit of the absolute, a limit of meaning, a limit of the being (conscious or unconscious), a limit of seduction and delirium. And this without the romantic hope of founding yet another community extolling the cult of Ancient Greece, for example, or the cult of cathedrals, or that of a brighter future. But, on the contrary, by confronting the men and women of today with their solitude and their disillusionment — solitude and disillusionment to a degree perhaps never seen before in the history of humanity — nonsense and emptiness.

The paradox — whence the accusation of terrorism — stems from the fact that this confrontation with the impossible takes on not the form of complacency with despair, but rather that of irony and vitality. Because, beyond the impossible, the imaginary is restored and asserted, whereas it had been put to one side and challenged, notably by certain trends in surrealism and existentialism. Pangs of love, values, meaning, man, woman, history, certainly; but I am not traveling to Abyssinia, I do not belong to the communist party, and if I go to China or to structuralism, I will return. I am taking a trip to the end of the night. This is called writing-thought. It isn’t much, but without it, there is perhaps nothing. Such is the path of the samurais.

3. What theory?

We understand better now that, faced with the challenge of the contemporary imaginary experience, the reception of ancient texts just as much as modern ones finds itself invited — certainly not obliged, so implacable and inevitable is the weight of tradition! — to think about this *anti*-thought: to accompany it in its deconstructive radicality, but also to clarify it, indeed to judge it. One particular status of interpretation therefore imposes itself on this theory, confronted with the newly unveiled regime of the imaginary. It is a question of thinking of the height of the psychic-and-worldly experience of a writing which presents risks for *common sense* (for consensus, for repression) and which, for this reason, clarifies the *fragility* in it. In this context, and confronted once more with the question: “what is literature good for?”, theory responds: for thinking and for making others think about the fragility of social

bonds and of shareable meaning — notably those boundaries where meaning and its subject can revolt to the point of abjection or ecstasy. Theory participates from then on in that thought of demolition and metaphysics — the *Abbau* of Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, the “deconstruction” according to Derrida — which psychoanalysis applies to the individual and which literary theory, for its part, attempts to apply to imaginary formations with a collective goal.

When literary theory is conceived of in this manner, the status of the interpretation that constitutes it is modified. We know how difficult it is to put our finger on it: Barthes tried to do so in *Criticism and Truth* (1966); in responding to the historicist empiricism of pedantic “good sense,” and in taking the risk of confusing interpretation with the imaginary. In what follows, and to conclude, I will try to lead you, in my own way, into what seems to me to be a necessary balance between “thinking” and “judging” in the interpretation of literary texts.

If one were to distinguish the initiators of literary theory from the epigones, one would notice that theoretical advances take place in personal works where the neutrality of the interpreter is thwarted by his often required implication. Thus, Bakhtine, in his books on Rabelais and Dostoyevsky, proposes an interpretative model which is only readable in the context of a controversy between formalists and Marxists, and also based on the author’s personal tastes for the ambiguities of the carnival, which he contents himself to follow right up until the modern novel. Thus, Barthes, in his *S/Z*, only proposes deciphering codes for Balzac based on a very personal reading, and which reveal his musings and his own sexuality. It is the same for me, whether I am writing about Lautréamont or Mallarmé, or even more still about Céline or Proust: “semiotics”, the “abjection” or the distinction between the “character” of novels and “characters” are effects of *transference* onto texts and authors, just as much as conceptualizations. The decentering of the conscious subject, which we have noted in modern literature, and which Freud explored, profoundly supports the interpretation which I espouse in literary theory — and which differs in this respect from “hermeneutics”. Does this mean an abandonment of interpretation in favour of a generalized fiction which intensifies fiction?

In following the text by Céline, I am trying to accompany him in the logic of his language, of his conscious and unconscious themes, with the goal of questioning them. The linguistic, stylistic, psychoanalytical, and philosophical tools allow me to accompany him, but also allow me to uncover the author’s and the text’s shameful meaning, in ways that this meaning perhaps never appeared to the author, but such as it appears to me. A thinking me and a judging me. What’s the difference?

Hannah Arendt, who followed Heidegger, though ironically, in the “wind of thought”, put great emphasis on the interrogative reach of the act of thinking, which I would like to update in the theoretical context that preoccupies us today. It is a matter of questioning, without complacency, every

identity, notion, value, meaning — to analyze them in the sense of dissolving them, turning them around, sending them back to their memory. I would say: to tackle them in revolt, to rebel against them. But this work of dissolving that it theoretical thinking resembles analytical interpretation, and not enough for literary theory which, as a social act, is obliged to *judge*. Close on Kant's heels, Arendt adds to the liberty to *think* an obligation to *judge*. And, it is on *esthetic judgment* that she attempts to found a more general theory of judgment which applies to politics, and could interest us. For is it not for the readers, and therefore the public sphere, that our interpretation is intended, an interpretation which, for this reason, takes on an intrinsically political value?

Paradoxically, esthetic judgment, according to Kant and reread by Arendt, is based... on taste. This sense, among the most personal of senses, tributary of the pleasures of the mouth, oral pleasure alternating with distaste, is nonetheless susceptible to being transformed into the "duty" to correspond with an "enlarged mentality", none other than that of language (mentality and language for which all tables deserve the common name of "table"). Human beings, according to Kant and Arendt, are initially defined by their ability to transform pleasure into duty, meaning into language, immeasurable uniqueness into an enlarged mentality. Arendt wishes to shift the emphasis of this ability — which is the dawn of civilization, the boundary between pleasure and duty — from the limited field of esthetics to politics itself, and we can only dream of the benefits of such a social contract. The sublime and fragile ability, which Freud explored in his own way, and to which he assigned the less pleasant name "repression" (*Verdrängung*), a condition of language.

We know that this ability to share, when all is said and done, a policy which Hannah Arendt wanted to rehabilitate and restore, was broken by the Shoah. Herself a victim of this abjection, Arendt, with her rather particular religion, persisted in believing in the power of language to not become insane, but to be shared by a larger human community, originally founded on esthetical judgment as a starting point for political judgment.

A legitimate question remains, however, which applies not only to current events, but also to the meetings between the imaginary and the impossible which I touched on earlier. And what if the Shoah was not simply an accident in European history, but that, under certain historical circumstances, it caused an intrinsic potentiality of humankind to explode, that madness and that folly which art and literature treat in their own way, and in so doing, dismiss, keep in check, shift emphasis, to avoid outshining them? We should not forget that, in speaking of theory, we stand alongside this break. Georges Bataille, more catastrophic than Arendt, looked on the other side of that enlarged mentality: visionary of pleasure and disgust, great spasms which the speaking being has some trouble doing without when rationality and repression are broken, and which the writer intended for *literature*, so that it would accompany them in fantasy, and for *theory*, so that it would exhaust them in elucidation and laughter.

Neither a philosopher nor a writer, between Arendt and Bataille, neither an expert in repression nor a host for pleasure, Freud seems to sit on the fence. The interpretation which he proposes for the *anti*-thought of the unconscious, but also for writing, is a bet on meaning, inasmuch as Freud would be susceptible to elaborating the drive, but without end, and with uneasiness.

Attentive to analytical interpretation, I transpose it into the experience of writing, the objective of which, I will repeat, though unique, is nevertheless immediately social. When I *think* Céline's text, I bring her logic to the fore, but my questioning thinking does not in any way lead me to some sort of adherence. For the time being, I bet on the existence of a community, on a common sense inevitably stemming from repression (according to Freud), or capable of transforming pleasure and disgust into a shared value (according to Kant and Arendt). From then on, I am not only thinking: I am judging based on this blameless community to which I belong and at which I aim my reading and my interpretation. Having exposed Céline's logic leads me to judge it in depth: beginning with the depth of her experience, which I know to be contagious. I preserve its uniqueness; I reveal "who" speaks which truths, and at what risk. But I do not compare them any less with the communal judgment that he has destroyed through his invasive, rebellious, abject and exhilarating idiolect, which infects us and which allows us to live life to the fullest: on the boundary between the shared and the undisclosable. For such are the stakes of literature: after the time of the sacred (which was that of stains: of sensible as opposed to significant) and the time of religion (which was that of the forbidden and of transgression, of paternal symbolism and of the impossible real), the literary experience is situated at the junction of the singular and the shared. By questioning the identity of language, of the subject, and of social bonds. To open them, to abolish them, to renew them. Theory which listens to it, and which would want to remain contemporary with this epochal transformation, has to be in itself a revelation of the person who gets involved in it: by analyzing, just as much as by judging these confrontations with the impossible which is this paradoxical (I mean rebellious) experience which we still call literature.

*Julia Kristeva*¹

¹ Author's address: The University of Paris VII, Case 7010, 2 Place Jussieu, 75251 Paris, France; e-mail: kristeva@paris7.jussieu.fr. Translated from French by Marc Trottier.