

Increasing the Probable in the Improbable: an Enquiry into the Other Night of Literature

The binary structural opposition around which Jean Bessière develops his reflection on the status of the Literary is clearly announced and dated:

We thus have at our disposal, since the 19th Century, two paradigms of Literature. Characterizing one or the other allows us to define two poles of literary creation: the first stemming from the refusal to identify Literature with a questioning of the real; the second stemming from the fable of such a questioning (15).¹

Basically, it is the story of a "slash" which will be told here or rather, less metaphorically, rethought, on an epistemological level: the story, very obviously, of Saussure's algorithm defining the sign and its "two-faced" nature: S/s.

And this is why it seems possible, as well, to characterize the two "poles" thus defined, by means of reflection upon the constitutive duality of signs. A "high risk" duality in that it is doubtless not excessive to assert that the relational conflict between these two components, however unthinkable they may be separately, punctuates the history of contemporary poetics — Jacobson's theme and Lacan's variations amongst others — to the benefit, in the majority of cases, of the signifier!

"*The refusal to identify Literature with a questioning of the real*" is thus to recall the manner in which "literary Modernity" has tried to make the signifier autonomous, thus opposing the reduction of the distinction between the

1 So as to avoid an unnecessary increase in the number of notes, the references to Jean Bessière "s essay, *Quel statut pour la littérature?* (PUF, "L'interrogation philosophique," 2001) will have their page numbers indexed within the main body of the article.

signifier and the signified, between the tangible and the intelligible, made by classical thought in favour of the intelligible, and thus, of the transparence of language in itself, of its power of representation and of mastery of the world. But it is also to recall the drift away from this "song of the signifier" and the way in which, transformed into a murmur, into a rumour, it has lead Literature towards an infinite movement of repetition and, especially, towards a foreclosure of its nature as an act of communication. An act of communication which is delayed, certainly, but is nonetheless insurmountable because, in all evidence, this "infinite language" may never be *initially* apprehended — as formally designated as it may be, as "obscure" as it may seem — other than through the words of the tribe which constitute it. This experience has given birth to an entire literature, described by Jean Bessière as being the "literature of exceptional status," characterized by a mythological nature of the act of writing, defined as the only possible residual mythology, in a scriptural civilization such as Western civilization.²

Jean Bessière sets against this literature the presence, continual but surely more discreet, of another approach to writing, an approach acknowledging the constitutive ambiguity of signs and accepting this constitutive *fold* of articulated language, so as to take full advantage of its possibilities, within the play of tensions never relaxed between the two faces of a sign which hold each other in place while denying each other any form of supremacy. Between presence and absence. It seems to me that, through this, literature which is "outside of exceptional status" has acknowledged with lucidity the insurmountable fact that founds our relationship to language, as described by Giorgio Agamben:³

The original nucleus of signifying is neither within the signifier, nor within the signified; neither within writing nor within voice, but within the fold of presence on which they are based: the *logos*, which characterizes Man [...], is this fold which unites and divides all things in the "joint" of presence. And that which is

2 See Michel de Certeau's analyses in *L'invention du quotidien, 1. Arts de faire* (Gallimard, 1990 for the paperback edition ["Folio" n°146]), section IV "Usages de la langue" ("Uses of language"). (Translator's note: all English equivalents of titles of books and articles appearing in this article are given as approximations only, in order to help the reader to understand the pertinence of the quotations: they do not correspond to actual titles of published translations in English.)

3 The edition of 1992 is quoted; 1977 is the original one.

human is precisely this fracture of presence, which opens onto a world and on which language is based (Agamben 1992, 262).

That is to say, reversing the order of the clauses: Literature as an esthetic practice whose medium is language is itself made possible by this fracture of presence, by the presence of this "slash" of the algorithm of signs, that opens onto this essential impropriety in which it may spread forth. This literature which, in the final analysis, is established according to a necessarily figurative regime, metaphorical because based on the tension of its literal denotation and of its symbolical interpretation, is, precisely, *"the fable of the questioning of the real."* This literature whose paradigm, today, seems to me to be the strongest, is the detective novel, but which also includes, according to Jean Bessière, by the same token, the fantastic, science fiction and heteronymous poetry:

From the fantastical representation of the narrative of science fiction, from the detective novel to heteronymous poetry, the literature which is outside of exceptional status makes, in its fictions, out of the world that the individual human being faces, the explicit context of Literature, without there being given to this human being a power of expression which would be confused with the power of language, nor to the world a faculty of expression which would engage the power of Literature. This also means defining anew the context of Literature through the description of contexts, which it alone can produce because they engage the imagination — as in science fiction and the fantastic —, or that it produces as variations on contexts which may be considered real and are thus enlarged — as in the detective novel. (156)

It goes without saying that such an alternative, in its radical nature, is intended as a provocation. Its principal interest embraces a strict epistemological requirement. And it would be vain to disqualify, *a posteriori*, the various productions of "literature of exceptional status," just as it does not seem possible to project this schematic dualism onto this or that literary work in particular, so as to redefine its "nature." This is all the less possible because the identification of the Literary has been, during the last two centuries, ceaselessly designated, more and more, by the hegemony of a certain critical discourse, which determines settings and protocols of reading in keeping with its theoretical and ideological presuppositions. An obvious fact which could apply to the analyses presented in *Quel statut pour la littérature?* No, in all evidence the aim of this essay is, it seems to me, to establish an *inventory*. Or, more precisely, it is concerned with re-reading the literary productions of the last two centuries, in insisting on the impasses and incoherencies —

synchronically functional — which define the literary environment. It is these impasses and incoherencies which maybe explored today ...in a different way. This journey is made inevitable because the alternative between these two paradigms is not only given, but defined in a resolute — and resolving — manner: the whole study leans to the assertion of the obsolescence of literature of "exceptional status" and offers a comprehensive critical perspective on "Modernity" and a reexamination of its epistemic foundations, so as to allow us to project a status of the Literary, and its implications, here and now:

This perspective supposes that we set aside or undo the literality of the history of Literature over the last two centuries — that we not read in a literal way the diverse esthetics, the diverse poetics — and that we recognize the works and the types of Literature which stem themselves from a play on "deliteralization" in order to come to the — paradoxical — expression of the commonplace, of action, of time, of history. This re-composition is not without importance in redefining an [intrinsic] property of Literature. (55)

Indeed, "this re-composition is not without importance in redefining an [intrinsic] property of Literature"! This re-composition means acknowledging the fact that for the past two centuries, in its tendencies, Literature — as well as Art in general — in its "exceptional status" has conceived its function in terms of power, experiencing to as great an extent as possible *Bartleby's* deconstructive assertion: *I would prefer do not*. Retrospectively, it is certainly not doubtful that this indexation of Literature according to the pure power of language is derived from an epistemological necessity to rethink our relationship to the world and to bear witness to the impossibility of maintaining a representation with pretensions to totalization. It is no more doubtful that this experience has deconstructed in an irreversible and functional manner the polarities inherited from Metaphysics regarding truth and falseness, regarding the verification or the non-verification of all things, thus questioning our being in itself, before or beyond its being true or false.⁴

4 Let us remember the conclusion, famous for its prophetic tone, of Michel Foucault's essay *Les mots et les choses*, published, significantly (from a retrospective point of view), in 1966 (Gallimard, "Bibliothèque des Sciences humaines"): "Man is an invention whose recent date [of appearance] — and perhaps whose imminent departure — is easily shown by the archeology of our thought. If these dispositions [those upon which the epistemic base of the *episteme* of representation is founded] were to disappear as they have appeared, if— through some event of which we may in the best of cases predict the possibility, but neither whose form nor whose promise we know for the moment —

Retrospectively, once again, it is conceivable to synthesize the extreme experience of the refusal of representation as the postulation of a relationship to language in terms of power that does not have its own actualization at its disposal. These examples of literary discourse, characterized by the claim to pure power, always appear as "terminal" discourse: "their closure is constituted by the proof that they give to that which is outside of them, to that which does not take part in the game of power and of actualization, and which is often characterized, thematically, by silence and by death" (116).

This link between death and language should be reinterpreted in two different ways. There is no need to reassert the fact that it constitutes the unsurpassable horizon of our relationship to language, nor that it appears as the condition of the very possibility of thought, as Agamben has defined it (or, in a very different perspective, Jacques Derrida, in *Donner la mort*), while instituting this retreat from presence, and undoing all original thought. The assertion that this link should organize or even exhaust all fictional discursive practice as well as critical discourse which proposes a reading of it, is now more or less unproductive. It is thus that we must relativize the illustrative exemplarity of this link which Giorgio Agamben believes to have found in Melville's *Bartleby*. In the best of cases, we are dealing with border-line analyses, functional but at their limits, of a type of Literature which has legitimately explored, in its time, the question of limits.

In his essay *Bartleby or Creation*, written in 1993, Agamben, analyzing the scribe's attitude of systematic retreat (*Bartleby* is a "copyist" by trade), the hero of Melville's fable, published in 1853, as being exemplarily ethical, as being characteristic of the only possible ethical attitude, *today*, such as it is defined in the essay entitled *La communauté qui vient (The Community To Come)* (1990), declares:

[...] the only ethical experience [...] consists in being one's own power, in allowing one's (own) possibility to exist, in exposing, in other words, the formlessness in each form and the non-actuality of each act. (Agamben 1990, 95)

That *Bartleby* may be considered as the prefiguration of the only ethical attitude today, seems to me to be only partly acceptable (I will come back to

they were to fall through, as the floor of classical thought fell through, at the turn of the 18th century, then we might well bet that Man would be erased, like a face made of sand at the edge of the ocean" (*op. cit.*, 398).

this point), but this relationship to the world is still presented as the paradigmatic metaphor of the esthetic function. Is it really acceptable to embrace, without nuance, such a conclusion, which makes of *Bartleby's I would prefer do not* the verbal expression of the ethical attitude *par excellence* ? That *Bartleby's* "de-creative" assertion is a border-line experience, that it is an exemplary presentation of that "figure of nothingness from which all creation derives and, at the same time, the most implacable claim of nothingness as pure and absolute power" (Agamben 1995, 39), may not be denied. That it authorizes a conclusion, whose tone is that of Benjamin, as to the links between such an attitude and the "will, not to buy back that which has been, but [to] save that which has never been" seems legitimate, in relation to this work. However, using Deleuze's commentaries, as Agamben still does, in order to confer to fiction a "devastating power" (sic) because the expression used by Melville's character "disconnects words and things [...] and cuts off language from all reference," and brings forth "a man without reference" (Agamben 1995, 42), seems to me to be a conclusion which, at the beginning of the third millennium, is dated. Indeed, such conclusions, though they may remain "epistemically" coherent, are insufficient to be able to give an account of the most recent evolutions of Literature.⁵

I prefer, *at this time*, to adhere to the observation, general in nature and thus not referring to any particular work, made by Jean Bessière in his study when he remarks that all attempts to create an act of communication through the specific movement of Literature must present the latter as being incom-

5 The interpretation of Melville proposed by Agamben must be recognized, however, as having coherence, particularly in terms of unity of the epistemic field, which the rather improbable study by Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby et compagnie* (*Bartleby and Company*) is far from demonstrating. This study offers a census "of all the books that remain in suspension in World Literature," project which is described, on the back cover, by the assertion: "Vila-Matas shows that this crisis thrusts us within the very heart of writing. Here is something to take hope in: like its forerunners, the Literature of the future will be a Literature of refusal or will cease to exist." (Christian Bourgois, 2002 [2000 for the original]). The author takes into account, at random in his readings, certainly very broad, a large number of "cases," of works which were never anything but "potential," but he does so by means of a diachronic history of Literature which attributes to La Bruyere, to Chamfort, to Maupassant as well as to a theory of "practitioners of writing" in the most diverse geographical and chronological contexts, an equal consciousness of the exemplarity of the "book to come"! Equal to that of authors such as Kafka or Beckett: each of these authors seeming to have read, by anticipation, Mallarmé and Blanchot!

plete and indecisive because its power may not be exhausted nor even be transfused into its realization "as an act":

"The figuration of power and of action implies that reality is in fact the question of its [own] representation and that as such it calls for the continuation of representation. This does not mean the assertion of the failure or of the cognitive partiality of representation, but the indication that representation takes place according to two deficiencies: that of its object, and that of its own realization."
(190)

Without doubt, the breaking down of the hegemony of a certain type of New Criticism based on a political Utopia which led Roland Barthes to dream of "revolutionary" dogmas of the *logos*, is not foreign to the return to acknowledgement of the rethinking of the communicational function of a type of Literature based on its own two constitutive deficiencies: that of its object, and that of its realization. This is, in fact, a rethinking of the questions of the right to representation, of language as relating to things themselves, of language as relating to essential anthropological interrogations, which need to be dealt with while taking into account the specificity of the powers of Literature, but which in fact, today (and I wish to take the risk of this assertion), center on the question of ethics. It is indeed a question of

[...] undoing the exceptional status of Literature, [which] supposes that we cease to allow the exposition of the un-decidable for and in itself [...] This consists therefore in reforming the question of the right to representation, and in relocating the theme of the power of language to the domain of all action, of all time, of History, and of reality itself. (129)

That the question is ethical, is not, in fact, explicitly stated in the conclusions of the study; however, the fact that it is anthropological is clearly affirmed, and it suffices, to verify this, to paraphrase some of the final statements exposing the conditions of the appearance of a "new scene of Literature." We are reminded that

[w]hen Literature presents itself as a general medium [...] it must figure its reference to common life, in the most diverse aspects of the reference. In Literature which is outside of exceptional status, this reference to common life is made in accordance to all the points of view which it may contain. (248)

In other words, if this Literature outside of exceptional status has not intended, over the last two centuries, to present itself as an autonomous reality, it is because it has proposed an increase in our experience of the world, and "to increase the probable in the improbable." And thus, it has existed and continues to exist within the exact wielding of its power and of its specificity in giving us fictions which, if they are not of this world (the detective novel and the anonymity of a murderer without knowable identity, the fantastic and science-fiction which create improbable, possible worlds born in the forge of our dreams, and of our anxiety), may be read figuratively, as so many interrogations relative to our action in the world, and to the indexation of the world to that which is human or inhuman, and especially to the difficulty of locating the border between these two "reigns."⁶ And it does this according to an obvious mechanism of confrontation (between pre-figuration and configuration, Paul Ricoeur would say) because if "Literature is according to several worlds and its question lies within the presenting of several worlds," that which is at stake is that "these worlds be referable to *this* world and to human beings" (250). While accepting to define an area of problematic questioning which works

... through the design of the most general communication in accordance with the un-decidable, whose principal means are the showing of the other without the other, and of view point without any other view point, Literature outside of exceptional status finishes recreating for itself the perspective of a pragmatics of otherness and an historical perspective. (249)

- 6 This function of re-description "enlarged to include our common life" is not fundamentally different from the power of re-figuration given, by Paul Ricoeur, to the act of configuration which all narrative organization implies, but whose liberty "at all depths" is reserved for fiction alone. The distinction is made based on the selective highlighting of fictional strategies: science-fiction, narrative of the fantastic or detective novel, heteronymous poetry all have a common characterization. That of the specific interaction which these "types" of narrative or poetry create between transitivity and intransitivity, between realism and the denial of realism, between the proper and the improper. In the final analysis, the essential difference consists in the possibility to read the work in defining it as a "saturated symbol" (Nelson Goodman). For all that, Jean Bessière's propositions circumscribe, through the description of literary forms stemming from the refusal of the "exceptional status," forms which all have in common the developing of their diegeses around the questioning of the problem of identity, and around the possibility of identifying these worlds which, if they are not of "our" world, may only be conceived in order to return to our world in the form of problematic questioning.

In order to understand such a conclusion, it is necessary to identify the — Romantic — origin of this exposition of "the other without the other, of view point without any other view point." It is to be found in "the equal rhetorical mechanism" created at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a moment in time at which

[t]he romantic poet intended to speak in his own name and on a representative basis. He took for granted the consent of others, of someone outside himself, as to the alliance or the confusion of proper discourse and of representative discourse. [...] Within this Romantic hypothesis, the only opposite of Literature is silence ... [...] It is thus necessary to express the consequence of the lack of alternative to Literature: the equality of the rhetorical mechanism. If the subjective discourse is a representative discourse, if the subjective discourse and the rhetorical discourse are reciprocal, there is equality of *ethos* and of *logos*." (18-19)

It is thus an hegemonic view point which is presented, that of an ontology of language in its esthetic function, from which derive all the variations on the poetics of Modernity, the variations stemming, obviously, from inescapable contradictions born of this literary absolute. Contradictions which are developed, in their turn, by the successive poetics. The same poetics which, at the end of the 19th century, emphasize the impossible subjective appropriation of signs: it suffices, in this respect, to evoke Agamben's epistemological remarks in *Le langage et la mort* (*Language and Death*), in which, recognizing the validity of Derrida's ideas on the denunciation of all metaphysics of presence, he reminds us of the impossibility of hoping to include our own voice in a language which implies precisely the mourning of "presence." But he immediately adds that this extraneous quality of language with regards to *my* voice (just as we say, Agamben affirms, "the voice of the nightingale") is the very condition of the possibility of communication and of thought, the condition of the birth of metaphysics, and this, since its emergence in ancient Greece.

There is no voice that is ours, that we may follow through the traces of language, and seize — to remind us of it — at the very moment at which it dissolves itself in names and engraves itself in letters. We speak with the voice that we do not have and which has never been written [...] And language is always a "dead letter."

A major, continual anthropological contradiction is being expressed throughout the 19th century (which it is not necessary to restate here), relative to the difficulty of presenting a "cloven" subject which would authorize that constitution of an identity whatsoever, be it a narrative identity.

But, whatever these contradictions may be, whatever may be the processes of radicalization sometimes put into play over the last two centuries, leading to the extreme point of auto-dissolution of the literary work into silence (Holderlin, Mallarme, Artaud), this rhetorical mechanism remains the cognitive framework through which these "reflexive"⁷ attempts, exhausting themselves in showing its impossible maintenance, have been made. Evidently, if the hypotheses regarding the loss of all footing implied by speech⁸ were intended to free us from the old trap of representation — that of the world and of the self—, the recognition that the reader has never been able to give

7 Jean Bessière evokes, functionally, the process of positioning of Literature, over the last two centuries, as being "the Other of all discourse." He analyzes the double movement, characteristic of the 19th century, between the social sciences which, within the epistemology which they make of themselves, are placed within a narrative, and thus literary, perspective, with, as a consequence, the difficulty of situating, in a precise manner, literary discourse with regards to the social sciences. There is thus a reaction of Literature in trying to place itself outside of all these forms of discourse and thus, in claiming an "exceptional status." Literature "intends not to participate in an ensemble which tries to represent it — the other human activities, the other arts, the other forms of representation, the other forms of exposition of knowledge, and, quite brutally, the other forms of discourse. Such a definition does not give to understand that Literature does not stem from a society, a culture or from language — that would be an unrealistic and absurd hypothesis. Such a definition gives to understand that Literature intends to constitute its own ensemble, irreducible to any other ensemble, particularly those ensembles which include elements similar to those which Literature contains — discursive practices, formal practices, symbolic practices, representative practices, hermeneutic practices. This exception may also be formulated thusly : Literature identifies itself *through* itself as the entirely Other — that which may not be represented in any ensemble — " (74).

8 "... the / who speaks becomes fragmented, dispersed and scattered until it disappears in this naked space. If language has its place only within the lonely sovereignty of "I speak," nothing may limit it by rights, — nor limit that which it addresses, nor the truth of what it says, nor the values or representational systems which it uses; in short, it is no longer discourse or communication of meaning, but rather the displaying of language in its raw being, as pure, unfurled exteriority; and the subject who speaks is no longer really responsible for discourse [...] that the inexistence within its own emptiness continues without cease the indefinite displaying of language" (Michel Foucault 1986, 11-12; first publication 1966).

to the literary object has always been dictated by these tropisms of representation and of "representance," be it to conclude, as has often been the case in the reception of contemporary art, in the form of strangeness, of rejection, or yet more radically, of the denial of the belonging of such creations to the realm of art. This may be simply because the presumption of pertinence — which may be verified in many ways — is the implicit demand of this cognitive framework.

However, we may doubtless consider these contradictions as being productive, and define, today, the function and the status of Literature with regards to them: this implies the autonomy of the process of elaboration of the world of the literary work, which means first of all that the exercise of fiction does not proceed from any constraint, and can claim absolute irresponsibility, and, simultaneously, a conception of the literary work as a shareable experience. This is not the shareable experience of an interiority which proposes an image of the Same which would be solid enough to include the Other, just as arbitrarily, fallaciously designed by this projection which annexes the Same itself; but rather, the shareable experience of a *night* (the expression comes from Emmanuel Levinas) which is not nothingness, by far, but the very image of the enigma of our condition as beings in the world (that which, within an ontological dichotomy, Levinas calls "the dark part of being"). Certainly, such a sharing of night is not legitimized by any established pretension to "representance," and is even less justified, because it cannot put claim to any authority and especially, no longer, that of the "Romantic" subject which postulated — in the very expression of its difference — a form of exemplarity. But such a sharing may be attempted at the risk of its frail uncertainty, never assured by its transmissible nature, by its very possibility of being recognized by the other as a *call*, and in the final analysis, as an ethical act, and as a veritable gift. And if, after all, it must be attempted, it is because, whether we like it or not, we must accept the acknowledgement of that fact that "language is our voice, our language. The way in which we speak is our ethics" (Agamben 195).

The logical implication, abrupt in its formulation, in the second statement, is surprising! But the importance of this affirmation, today, seems to me to justify taking it into account. This being said, a new contradiction emerges from these words: how can a literary work today express things without expressing them, while appearing in the ethical mirror of shareable expression? The conclusive expectations of Literature such as they are formulated in the *explicit* of *Donner la mort* (literally, *Giving Death*), a supplemen-

tary variation by Derrida on the ethics of giving, strongly re-formulate this state of things:

it being *expected that* the supposedly fictional structure of all literary works exonerates the author from responsibility to political or civic law, with regards to meaning and referent (concerning what the *inside* of his text means and aims to do, exhibits or encodes, and which thus may always not limit itself to giving meaning and referent, and mean nothing), while increasing, infinitely, his responsibility for the singular event which each work constitutes. (Derrida 206)⁹

May Literature "outside of exceptional status," in its most recent manifestations, be defined as a space of productive exposition of this contradiction?

In order to attempt to answer this question, I will go back to one of the manifestations of this type of literature, as identified by Jean Bessière : the detective novel. This is for a number of reasons, certain of which seem paradoxical in view of the very terms of the contradiction which we have just defined.

Let us start with the positive reasons. Recent narrative fiction, particularly the Italian novel, uses this "form" — while subverting it, from the inside — with such frequency that it seems to me to be possible to qualify it as a symptom (and, in fact, it would justify an "epidemiological"¹⁰ study). A *contrario*, neither science-fiction nor the fantastic seem to me, by a long ways, to have given rise to such an infatuation.

Now for a paradoxical reason, linked to the archeology of the detective form. It suffices to evoke the specific game of the detective novel, of the crime novel, or, more generally, of the enigma-based novel, with the Aristotelian paradigm, and thus, with the *mimesis* on which, *a priori*, it founds the logic and the "realism" of its configuration. If there is, in fact, a practice of the novel which rests upon the principal of causality, on the procedures of

9 The italics are author's.

10 In *La contagion des idées (The Contagion of Ideas)* Dan Sperber puts a question relative to the mode of diffusion of cultural representations ("The epidemiologists have elaborated mathematical models for the transmission of disease, and it is tempting to apply these models to diverse forms of cultural transmission" (qtd in Jacob 82). I am not sure if such a transposition is possible, but, by extension of this reflection, it seems "tempting" to search for the reasons for which the detective "form," or at least a spectral remains of this form, such as the 19th century has canonically denned it, has made a come-back over the last twenty years in fictional writing.

linking of cause and effect, on the assumption of truth (in terms of recognition, and of naming of the "guilty") in the outcome; if there is a practice of the novel subjected to representation as a mode of integration *without remains* of all indicial presentations, and of all the functions scattered throughout the narrative thread of the enquiry, it is certainly the detective novel and its variants! In the final analysis, an anthropological reading of the detective form, such as the Positivism of the 19th century has conceived and developed it, allows us to conclude with the close links between this practice, the postulation of legibility and trust in an hermeneutics of revealing as application of an hermeneutics of meaning and, consecutively, the strong affirmation of civic law. Indeed, the model of the detective novel or, more vaguely, of the enigma-based novel, have been, in all regards, literary (sub-) genres which continually attest to a will for differed referential communication, whatever the supporters of these "bad" genres may say in suggesting a link between the detective novel and Modernity through the game of the over-exposed artifice (which is thus inductive to reflexivity) of the heuristic spells of the detective. No, I hold the detective novel, for the reasons linked to its very emergence during the 19th century, to be fundamentally transitive to the extent that it makes of the act of bringing about death an act which may not be interpreted metaphorically and which thus demands imperatively, on the contrary, to be interpreted anthropologically. This practice of fiction makes the explanation, the indexation to a name (that of the person responsible for this act), into a finality which, for all that, links it to historiography, regarding which it would be vain to affirm that it has never had a reflexive finality. It is, however, easy to verify that this narrative strategy has had, over the 20th century, an evolution characterized by irony, overexposing the artificiality of a particular discourse, that of the detective, and thus of his reflexive "performativity." A "modernist" variation clearly described in *Quel statut pour le littéraire?* Here is the basic pattern:

The detective novel shows a man, *anonymous* in principal, who can thus not be represented, and ends up representing him as being the agent of its actions, particularly of murder — an agent who may be represented through transgression, and thus may be named. (140)

And the modernist variation:

The question of the narrative, in this case, is thus not the representation of the action, nor of the antecedent world which it implies, nor of the world which it

projects, but the representation of the inferences which contains all representation of action. These inferences play a double role. Through the figure of the identification of the anonymous, they lend to the subject a conscience according to his actions. Through that which may be characterized as an over-determined presentation of action, they present this conscience according to a form of reflexivity, which in the detective novel is not usually directed linked to the agent, but rather exposed according to the detective's argument. (186)

But what happens to the anthropological interpretation of this practice when the principal of causality which directs the linking of the diverse elements, precisely in this sort of *fable*, opens on to something un-decidable, on to a form so enigmatic as to compromise all legibility, and all heuristics (at least all diegetic heuristics), or when the figure of the detective is dissolved, as in one of Tabucchi's narratives, in the absolute inconsistency of an enigma of which we no longer know if it has ever existed? How may we interpret the implications of narratives such as those to be found in Daniele del Giudice's last collection, *L'oreille absolue* (*The Absolute Ear*), in which the fact of bringing about (one's own) death is presented as being the manifestation of a total closure, of an un-interpretable reaction to a mysterious "dis-inhibiting" element in a murderer-character whose motives remain "unpredicable,"¹¹ but

11 This "nocturnal" identity, this "character-thus" (*personage-ainsi*), if I may say, is not without links to the "*being-thus*" (*être-ainsi*) defined by Agamben, but this fictional identity constitutes, in some ways, its reversal. Agamben remarks that this *being-thus* as representative of the "community to come" ... is not a substance, of which the *thus* expresses a determination, or a qualification. The being is not a presupposition, put before or after its qualities. The being which is thus, irreparably, *is its thus*; it is only its mode of being thus (the *thus* is not an essence which determines existence, but existence finds its essence in its own being-thus, in its being its own determination. The principal interest of this "community to come" — neither negative community in Maurice Blanchot's sense, nor heterotopic community in the sense in which Gianni Vattimo lays claims for a defined identity — is to exactly correspond, in anthropological terms, to the fictional character such as it is presented by the texts which are examined here. A "character-thus" without predicate given by the fictional context in which it appears, by default or by excess, because all the predicates which may be attributed to it — by the very indecisiveness of its "being-thus" — do not constitute a predicate. There is thus an exact correspondence, but with a change of signs as witness to the autonomy of the fictional space, sign of the sign of the very function of the act of esthetic configuration. Indeed, the whole analysis of this "community to come" implies again, in the discourse of Agamben, a reflection on a contemporary ethics, distinguished by the "revelation," not of the sacred nature of the world, but, on the contrary, of "its irreparably profane nature." Ethics is defined here as the possibility or the power of the mere existence of human life.

according to an unpredicatability which, in this case, only bears witness, tragically, to the absolute poverty in the world? As, more precisely, in the story entitled "The Absolute Ear" in which the decision to become a murderer is imposed upon the character through the involuntary audition of a piece of music heard by accident, involuntary audition of an insignificant piece of music, without origin, without reference, but which becomes the "only certainty without argument" (Giudice 31) which will determine the actions of the character-narrator, his decision to commit a murder, without motive, without conceivable finality. Such narratives subject the character, without nuance, to his own acts, without a hint of distance, with no other way out, especially ethically, which would authorize a reflection *on the power of not doing*. And it is doubtless because of this that the fictional behaviour patterns open onto a fundamental enigma, on to an impasse implicitly proposed as such; literally: the impasse of their interpretation. Such an impasse, as a literal response, proposed by a type of narration which, historically, appeared in order to imperiously furnish its resolution, thus manifests all its paradoxical strength. All Del Giudice's narratives have in common the unspeakable violence of the act of annihilating of others (or of oneself) which is implied by the fact of bringing on death (to oneself) and by the questioning which such behaviour induces in the reading conscience. The character of the detective has really never been anything other than the diegetic figure of this questioning, doted with an hermeneutical strength more or less artificially resolute, but always having, as an ultimate finality, the task of giving an account of this violence by integrating it into a discursive organization which, for lack of "explaining" it, tries to find its motives, to circumscribe it, to identify its "author," at the least. We should review the nature of the answer given by the figure of the detective, of its degree of autonomy with regards to the narrative authority, of its distinction (or lack thereof) with regards to the character who is the author of the "crime" and, within this review, the evolution of a dialectic may be seen: that of the question (posed by the crime) and of the answer (given by the unveiling), and of the progressive weakening of the answer and, correlatively, of the problematico-logical intensification of the question.¹²

12 See, on the subject of this epistemological orientation, Michel Mayer's study (256).

But, essentially, as soon as the figure of the detective, which Michel Butor has described as "Oedipal,"¹³ loses all ability to solve the enigma (of the Sphinx or of its figurative variations), especially because his identity, or even his existence in the whole of the role games which the detective novel puts into play, is threatened or disappears. In this context, the question of destructive violence is posed in its absolute nudity, in the anthropological urgency which can no longer be sublimated.

In such a case, how can the maintaining of a rhetorical mechanism be managed, when the *ethos* of the character stems from a "closure" such that no *logos* (that of the detective, or of the narrator) seems to be able to reduce its initial "unpredicatability"? On what role in "representance" may such an "acting" still pride itself?

I believe it possible to put forward a double argumentation. The first, continuing Jean Bessière's chain of reasoning, suggests that such fictional propositions indeed increase the probable within the improbable, that is to say, increase, in the exercising of their productive "irresponsibility," the experience of the possibilities that our common life may have to bear: in a double perspective, that of a pragmatics of otherness, (who is this voiceless other with which the night, apparently without sharing, haunts its fictions? what space may I occupy with regards to this other?) and that of the application of an historical perspective (the events of the current world, with their violence, itself sometimes absolutely interpretable, duplicate this questioning). And this double perspective derives, right through, from ethics: that which presupposes not so much the mastery, in the form of sovereign interpretation, of the night, and of this nocturnal violence, maybe more absolute than ever within the "closure" of the other which it manifests, but rather, the taking into account of this night as a question, as a *question about action*.

As regards the second series of arguments, in the form of an anthropological extension, it is inspired by Giorgio Agamben's last published study, *L'ouvert. De l'homme et l'animal*, in which a series of diachronic variations on the contrastive definitions of Man as opposed to animal follow upon one another, in order to arrive at an anthropological approach to the question of the subject, by interiorizing the following opposition: "the decisive conflict,

13 "The detective is the son of the murderer, Oedipus, not only because he solves an enigma, but because he kills him to whom he owes his tide, and without whom he would not exist as such (without crime, without obscure crimes, how would he appear?) ..." (Butor 148).

which governs all other conflicts [...] in our culture, [is] the conflict between the animality and the humanity of Man."

This worried interrogation, largely inspired by Heidegger, remarking upon the obsolescence of the anthropogenesis around which Western Humanism has developed, poses the question of the redefinition of human action, and thus of ethics, based on the opposition between animality and humanity, based on the opposition between closure (characteristic of animal behaviour) and openness in terms of distance, in terms of doing or not doing, in terms of power, therefore, characteristic of that which is human and of the very possibility of defining ethics, today.

We are dealing with an extension, through the very liberty of the "imaginative variation," of the experience of our common life, an extension tendentially centered on the exercise of a sort of deaf, mute, enigmatic violence, precisely placed around a particular morphology, that of the detective novel or rather its remains, its trace: the trace, therefore, of a form which has had, historically, as its function the accounting for and the reduction of violence. So why try to articulate this double observation with regards to the openly anthropological reflection of Giorgio Agamben? Because the narratives which are being examined pose precisely the question of the animality within humanity, not in terms of value judgment, or of explicit morals, but of questioning. The act of bringing on one's own death corresponds too often to the act of bringing about the death of another (Fois, Del Giudice) for the "intentions of the literary works" to be applied to anything other than to the presentation of the absolute and thus "problemato-logical" "closure" of human action. The "life" of these characters

...is no longer human, because it has completely forgotten any element of reason, any project concerned with dominating one's animal life ; but it cannot be called animal, either, if animality is indeed defined by its world-poverty and by its obscure expectation of revelation and of salvation. (Agamben 2002,134)

This question of the humanity and inhumanity of Man, captured in its most evident manifestation — violence —, was already being posed by Elio Vittorini in 1945 (the date is doubtless not a coincidence) in *Uomini e non* (*Man and non-Man*), in his commentaries on this tide:

Uomini e non, the Italian tide of the novel, means exactly that we, as humans, may also be "non-humans." That is to say that the tide tries to remind us that there are, in Man, numerous inhuman possibilities. But it does not divide humanity in

two parts, one of which would be all human and the other all inhuman. (Vittorini 8)¹⁴

And if I quote an *Italian* novelist of the post-war period as a means of giving perspective to the words of an *Italian* philosopher of the late 19th century, after having mentioned Antonio Tabucchi, Daniele del Giudice or Marcello Fois, it is because I have the feeling, made vague by the limits of my enquiry, that more than in other linguistic and cultural spaces, the evolution of the History of ideas, in Italy, since the 19th century (I am thinking of Leopardi) perceives itself with an almost photographic sensibility, for reasons which have doubtless to do with the absence of sedimentation of a centralist and homogenizing tradition.

And indeed, in the personal ethics of Leopardi, but also in what we might qualify as an anthropological postulate of an equally personal nature, a particular notion, that of boredom, already holds a central position: "Boredom is the desire for happiness, left, so to speak, in its pure state."¹⁵

Almost two centuries later, it is a re-reading of Heidegger's "profound boredom" which brings Agamben to his conclusions on the urgency of the

14 The quote finishes with a reflection on the distortion of meaning in the French translation of the tide: "The French tide, *Les Hommes et les autres (Man and Others)*, implies on the contrary such a division and changes to some extent the meaning of the tide."

15 That is to say, putting this extract into a larger context: *Zibaldone (October 17th, 1823)* : "[...] To speak of the absence of pleasure and of displeasure is to speak of boredom, not that, in an absolute sense, these two things are one, but because, in the nature of the living (at least, as long as they are aware of being alive), one may not exist without the other. Boredom never fails to fill the void that pleasure and displeasure leave in the souls of the living ; emptiness, that is to say the state of indifference without passion, does not exist in our minds, just as, in Ancient times, it was considered to exist in Nature. Boredom is comparable to the air here below which fills all the intervals between objects and hurries to take the place that they leave when nothing comes to replace them. I mean that the very emptiness of the human mind, the indifference, the absence of all passion, is boredom — boredom that is itself a sort of passion. But why must the living, when they do not feel pleasure nor suffer, necessarily be bored? Because it is impossible for them to desire happiness, that is to say pleasure and delight. This desire, when it is neither satisfied, nor directly opposed by that which conflicts with its satisfaction, is boredom. Boredom is the desire for happiness, left, so to speak, in its pure state...." (Leopardi 193).

redefinition of ethics and, this time, according to the considerations of fiction, it is the radical denial of this "boredom," and thus the denial of the very possibility of ethics, which governs the omnipresent violence in the narratives of the Italian authors mentioned above as an illustration of the arguments put forth in *Quel statut pour le littéraire?*

Let us try to give a rapid summary, in order to tie all these argumentative threads together. We have discussed the empire of speech and the maintaining of language as "power" in the dominant forms of literary expression of the 20th century. But as it is very evident that the will to maintain language in a state of pure power is swallowed by an equally pure murmur of language itself, it seems that a large number of attempts and a large number of intentions of literary works have been sustained by a tension between "closure" and "openness," in all senses of these words. We have evoked works that are continually characterized by a demand for distance with regards to the pace of the world, with regards to the immersion in material things, which in the final analysis was created by representation with aims to the positional mastery on the part of the subject which organized it and that diverse forms of Realism have tried to perfect through the unveiling *without remains* of things and of beings. This distance, this "being held in suspense," to quote the very characterization of boredom according to Heidegger, such as Agamben comments upon it, is nothing other than the revealing of the possibility to do or not to do for the "living human." This state of things shows a situation of latency in which that which is "made possible" is valued over that which is "accomplished." It may be that Literature of exceptional status is, subterraneously, the manifestation of this new condition, in which we still find "beings held in suspense" by a harrowing, illegible exteriority (that which we call "reality"), which, therefore, no longer offers any grasp on a state of "profound boredom" on the part of this living human, *in* the world, by tradition, but also, from here on, *before* it, because of its ungraspable complexity. It may be, then, that Literature "outside of exceptional status" (and especially within the enigma of the questioning of violence and of "closure" that it conveys in the detective novel) is placed in an imperceptible but decisive gap, in taking on the exposition and the presentation of this enigmatic violence and *in presenting the closed as closed*; in putting us, as human

beings, both in and before the world in an act of reflection which would appear, today, as a necessity for the defining of the status of Literature.

University of Paris III
Translated by Karla Grierson

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