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I

Criticism and Crisis

When the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé visited Oxford in 1894 to deliver a lecture entitled *La Musique et les lettres* and dealing with the state of French poetry at the time, he exclaimed, with mock sensationalism:

"I am indeed bringing you news. The most surprising news ever. Nothing like it ever happened before. They have tampered with the rules of verse . . . *On a touché au vers*" (Pléiade ed., 643).

In 1970, one might well feel tempted to echo Mallarmé's words, this time with regard not to poetry, but to literary criticism. *On a touché à la critique*. . . . Well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism and made it a cornerstone of the intellectual establishment have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse. One is tempted to speak of recent developments in Continental criticism in terms of *crisis*. To confine oneself for the moment to purely outward symptoms, the crisis-aspect of the situation is apparent, for instance, in the incredible swiftness with which often conflicting tendencies succeed each other, condemning to immediate obsolescence what

might have appeared as the extreme point of avant-gardisme briefly before. Rarely has the dangerous word "new" been used so freely; a few years ago, for very different reasons, there used to be in Paris a *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française,* but today almost every new book that appears inaugurates a new kind of nouvelle nouvelle critique. It is hard to keep up with the names and the trends that succeed each other with bewildering rapidity. Not much more than ten years ago, names such as those of Bachelard, Sartre, Blanchot, or Poulet seemed to be those of daring pioneers, and younger men such as Jean-Pierre Richard or Jean Starobinski proudly considered themselves as continuators of the novel approaches that originated with their immediate predecessors. At that time, the main auxiliary discipline for literary criticism was undoubtedly philosophy. At the Sorbonne, which then as now saw its role primarily as one of conservation and even reaction, the theses considered too bold and experimental to be handled by the chairs of literature would quite naturally find their home among the philosophers. These philosophers were themselves engaged in working out a difficult synthesis between the vitalism of Bergson and the phenomenological method of Husserl; this tendency proved quite congenial to the combined use of the categories of sensation, consciousness and temporality that is prevalent among the literary critics of this group. Today, very little remains, at least on the surface, of this cooperation between phenomenology and literary criticism. Philosophy, in the classical form of which phenomenology was, in France, the most recent manifestation, is out of fashion and has been replaced by the social sciences.

But it is by no means clear which one of the social sciences has taken its place, and the hapless and impatient new new critic is hard put deciding in which discipline he should invest his reading time. For a while, after Lucien Goldman's theses on the sociology of Jansenism in the seventeenth century, it seemed as if sociology was in the lead, and the name of Lukács was being mentioned in Parisian intellectual circles with the same awe that used to surround the figures of Kierkegaard and Hegel a few years earlier. But then Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques* appeared, and anthropology definitely edged out sociology as the main concern of the literary critic. Hardly had he mastered the difficult terminology of

tribal intersubjectivity when linguistics appeared over the horizon with an even more formidable technical jargon. And with the somewhat subterranean influence of Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis has made a comeback, giving rise to a neo-Freudian rebirth that seems to be quite germane to the concerns of several critics.

This sudden expansion of literary studies outside their own province and into the realm of the social sciences was perhaps long overdue. What is nowadays labeled "structuralism" in France is, on a superficial level, nothing but an attempt to formulate a general methodology of the sciences of man. Literary studies and literary criticism naturally play a certain part in this inquiry. There is nothing particularly new or crisis-like about this. Such attempts to situate literary studies in relation to the social sciences are a commonplace of nineteenth-century thought, from Hegel to Taine and Dilthey. What seems crisis-like is, among outer signs, the sense of urgency, the impatient competitiveness with which the various disciplines vie for leadership.

What interest can this Gallic turbulence have for literary studies in America? The irony of Mallarmé's situation at his Oxford lecture was that his English listeners had little awareness of the emergency by which he claimed to be so disturbed. English prosody had not waited for some rather disreputable foreigners to start tampering with verse; free and blank verse were nothing very new in the country of Shakespeare and Milton, and English literary people thought of the alexandrine as the base supporting the column of the Spenserian stanza rather than as a way of life. They probably had difficulty understanding the rhetoric of crisis that Mallarmé was using, with an ironic slant that would not have been lost in Paris, but that certainly baffled his foreign audience. Similarly, speaking of a crisis in criticism in the United States today, one is likely to appear equally out of tone. Because American criticism is more eclectic, less plagued than its European counterpart by ideology, it is very open to impulses from abroad but less likely to experience them with the same crisis-like intensity. We have some difficulty taking seriously the polemical violence with which methodological issues are being debated in Paris. We can invoke the authority of the best historians to point out

that what was considered a crisis in the past often turns out to be a mere ripple, that changes first experienced as upheavals tend to become absorbed in the continuity of much slower movements as soon as the temporal perspective broadens.

This kind of pragmatic common sense is admirable, up to the point where it lures the mind into self-satisfied complacency and puts it irrevocably to sleep. It can always be shown, on all levels of experience, that what other people experience as a crisis is perhaps not even a change; such observations depend to a very large extent on the standpoint of the observer. Historical "changes" are not like changes in nature, and the vocabulary of change and movement as it applies to historical process is a mere metaphor, not devoid of meaning, but without an objective correlative that can unambiguously be pointed to in empirical reality, as when we speak of a change in the weather or a change in a biological organism. No set of arguments, no enumeration of symptoms will ever prove that the present effervescence surrounding literary criticism is in fact a crisis that, for better or worse, is reshaping the critical consciousness of a generation. It remains relevant, however, that these people are experiencing it as a crisis and that they are constantly using the language of crisis in referring to what is taking place. We must take this into account when reflecting on the predicament of others as a preliminary before returning to ourselves.

Again, Mallarmé's text of his Oxford lecture, very closely linked to another prose text of his that was written a little later on the same subject and is entitled *Crise de vers*, can give us a useful hint. Apparently, in these texts, Mallarmé is speaking about the experiments in prosody undertaken by a group of younger poets who call themselves (often without his direct encouragement) his disciples, and whom he designates by name: Henri de Régnier, Moréas, Vielé-Griffin, Gustave Kahn, Charles Morice, Émile Verhaeren, Dujardin, Albert Mockel, and so on. And he pretends to believe that their partial rejection of traditional verse, in favor of free verse forms that he calls "polymorphic," represents a major crisis, the kind of apocalyptic tempest that often reappears as a central symbol in much of his own later poetry. It is obvious, for any historian of French literature, that Mallarmé exaggerates the importance of what is happening around him, to the point of appearing completely misled, not only in the eyes of his more phlegmatic British audience, but in the eyes of future historians as well. The poets he mentions are hardly remembered today, and certainly not praised for the explosive renovation with which Mallarmé seems to credit them. Moreover, one can rightly point out that Mallarmé not only overstates their importance, but that he seems to be blind to the forces within his own time that were indeed to have a lasting effect: he makes only a passing reference to Laforgue, who is somewhat incongruously linked with Henri de Régnier, but fails to mention Rimbaud. In short, Mallarmé seems to be entirely mystified into over-evaluating his own private circle of friends, and his use of the term "crisis" seems to be inspired by propaganda rather than by insight.

It does not take too attentive a reading of the text, however, to show that Mallarmé is in fact well aware of the relative triviality of what his disciples are taking so seriously. He is using them as a screen, a pretext to talk about something that concerns him much more; namely, his own experiments with poetic language. That is what he is referring to when he describes the contemporary condition of poetry as follows: "Orage, lustral; et dans des bouleversements, tout à l'acquit de la génération, récente, l'acte d'écrire se scruta jusqu'en l'origine. Très avant, au moins, quant au point, je le formule;—à savoir s'il y a lieu d'écrire." Freely translated and considerably flattened by filling in the elliptic syntax this becomes: "A tempest cleared the air: the new generation deserves credit for bringing this about. The act of writing scrutinized itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin, or, at any rate, far enough to reach the point where it could ask whether it is necessary for this act to take place." It matters little whether the "recent" generation to which Mallarmé refers indicates his younger disciples or his own contemporaries such as Verlaine, Villiers or even potentially Rimbaud. We know with certainty that something crisis-like was taking place at that moment, making practices and assumptions problematic that had been taken for granted.

We have, to a large extent, lost interest in the actual event that Mallarmé was describing as a crisis, but we have not at all lost interest in a text that pretends to designate a crisis when it is, in fact, itself the crisis to which it refers. For here, as in all of

Mallarmé's later prose and poetic works, the act of writing reflects indeed upon its own origin and opens up a cycle of questions that none of his real successors have been allowed to forget. We can speak of crisis when a "separation" takes place, by self-reflection, between what, in literature, is in conformity with the original intent and what has irrevocably fallen away from this source. Our question in relation to contemporary criticism then becomes: Is criticism indeed engaged in scrutinizing itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin? Is it asking whether it is necessary for the act of criticism to take place?

The matter is still further complicated by the fact that such scrutiny defines, in effect, the act of criticism itself. Even in its most naïve form, that of evaluation, the critical act is concerned with conformity to origin or specificity: when we say of art that it is good or bad, we are in fact judging a certain degree of conformity to an original intent called artistic. We imply that bad art is barely art at all; good art, on the contrary, comes close to our preconceived and implicit notion of what art ought to be. For that reason, the notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis. To speak of a crisis of criticism is then, to some degree, redundant. In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to literature: historical, philological, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism. For such periods or individuals will never put the act of writing into question by relating it to its specific intent. The Continental criticism of today is doing just that, and it therefore deserves to be called genuine literary criticism. It will become clear, I hope, that this is not to be considered as an evaluative but as a purely descriptive statement. Whether authentic criticism is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole remains an open question. One thing, however, is certain; namely, that literary studies cannot possibly refuse to take cognizance of its existence. It would be as if historians refused to acknowledge the existence of wars because they threaten to interfere with the serenity that is indispensable to an orderly pursuit of their discipline.

The trend in Continental criticism, whether it derives its language from sociology, psychoanalysis, ethnology, linguistics, or even from certain forms of philosophy, can be quickly summarized: it represents a methodologically motivated attack on the notion that a literary or poetic consciousness is in any way a privileged consciousness, whose use of language can pretend to escape, to some degree, from the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language. We know that our entire social language is an intricate system of rhetorical devices designed to escape from the direct expression of desires that are, in the fullest sense of the term, unnameable—not because they are ethically shameful (for this would make the problem a very simple one), but because unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility. And we know that the individual who chose to ignore this fundamental convention would be slated either for crucifixion, if he were aware, or, if he were naïve, destined to the total ridicule accorded such heroes as Candide and all other fools in fiction or in life. The contemporary contribution to this age-old problem comes by way of a rephrasing of the problem that develops when a consciousness gets involved in interpreting another consciousness, the basic pattern from which there can be no escape in the social sciences (if there is to be such a thing). Lévi-Strauss, for instance, starts out from the need to protect anthropologists engaged in the study of a so-called "primitive" society from the error made by earlier positivistic anthropologists when they projected upon this society assumptions that remained nonconsciously determined by the inhibitions and shortcomings of their own social situation. Prior to making any valid statement about a distant society, the observing subject must be as clear as possible about his attitude towards his own. He will soon discover, however, that the only way in which he can accomplish this self-demystification is by a (comparative) study of his own social self as it engages in the observation of others, and by becoming aware of the pattern of distortions that this situation necessarily implies. The observation and interpretation of others is always also a means of leading to the observation of the self; true anthropological knowledge (in the ethnological as well as in the philosophical, Kantian sense of the term) can only become worthy of being called knowledge when this alternating process of mutual interpretation

between the two subjects has run its course. Numerous complications arise, because the observing subject is no more constant than the observed, and each time the observer actually succeeds in interpreting his subject he changes it, and changes it all the more as his interpretation comes closer to the truth. But every change of the observed subject requires a subsequent change in the observer, and the oscillating process seems to be endless. Worse, as the oscillation gains in intensity and in truth, it becomes less and less clear who is in fact doing the observing and who is being observed. Both parties tend to fuse into a single subject as the original distance between them disappears. The gravity of this development will at once be clear if I allow myself to shift, for a brief moment, from the anthropological to the psychoanalytical or political model. In the case of a genuine analysis of the psyche, it means that it would no longer be clear who is analyzing and who is being analyzed; consequently the highly embarrassing question arises, who should be paying whom. And on a political level, the equally distressing question as to who should be exploiting whom, is bound to arise.

The need to safeguard reason from what might become a dangerous *vertige*, a dizziness of the mind caught in an infinite regression, prompts a return to a more rational methodology. The fallacy of a finite and single interpretation derives from the postulate of a privileged observer; this leads, in turn, to the endless oscillation of an intersubjective demystification. As an escape from this predicament, one can propose a radical relativism that operates from the most empirically specific to the most loftily general level of human behavior. There are no longer any standpoints that can a priori be considered privileged, no structure that functions validly as a model for other structures, no postulate of ontological hierarchy that can serve as an organizing principle from which particular structures derive in the manner in which a deity can be said to engender man and the world. All structures are, in a sense, equally fallacious and are therefore called myths. But no myth ever has sufficient coherence not to flow back into neighboring myths or even has an identity strong enough to stand out by itself without an arbitrary act of interpretation that defines it. The relative unity of traditional myths always depends on the existence

of a privileged point of view to which the method itself denies any status of authenticity. "Contrary to philosophical reflection, which claims to return to the source," writes Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Le Cru et le cuit*, "the reflective activities involved in the structural study of myths deal with light rays that issue from a virtual focal point. . . ." The method aims at preventing this virtual focus from being made into a *real* source of light. The analogy with optics is perhaps misleading, for in literature everything hinges on the existential status of the focal point; and the problem is more complex when it involves the disappearance of the self as a constitutive subject.

These remarks have made the transition from anthropology to the field of language and, finally, of literature. In the act of anthropological intersubjective interpretation, a fundamental discrepancy always prevents the observer from coinciding fully with the consciousness he is observing. The same discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies. It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to hide meaning behind a misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile. But it is the distinctive curse of all language, as soon as any kind of interpersonal relation is involved, that it is forced to act this way. The simplest of wishes cannot express itself without hiding behind a screen of language that constitutes a world of intricate intersubjective relationships, all of them potentially inauthentic. In the everyday language of communication, there is no a priori privileged position of sign over meaning or of meaning over sign; the act of interpretation will always again have to establish this relation for the particular case at hand. The interpretation of everyday language is a Sisyphean task, a task without end and without progress, for the other is always free to make what he wants differ from what he says he wants. The methodology of structural anthropology and that of post-Saussurian linguistics thus share the common problem of a built-in discrepancy within the intersubjective relationship. As Lévi-Strauss, in order to protect the rationality of his science, had to come to the conclusion of a myth without an author,

so the linguists have to conceive of a meta-language without speaker in order to remain rational.

Literature, presumably, is a form of language, and one can argue that all other art forms, including music, are in fact proto-literary languages. This, indeed, was Mallarmé's thesis in his Oxford lecture, as it is Lévi-Strauss' when he states that the language of music, as a language without speaker, comes closest to being the kind of meta-language of which the linguists are dreaming. If the radical position suggested by Lévi-Strauss is to stand, if the question of structure can only be asked from a point of view that is not that of a privileged subject, then it becomes imperative to show that literature constitutes no exception, that its language is in no sense privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms of language. The task of structuralist literary critics then becomes quite clear: in order to eliminate the constitutive subject, they have to show that the discrepancy between sign and meaning (*signifiant* and *signifié*) prevails in literature in the same manner as in everyday language.

Some contemporary critics have more or less consciously been doing this. Practical criticism, in France and in the United States, functions more and more as a demystification of the belief that literature is a privileged language. The dominant strategy consists of showing that certain claims to authenticity attributed to literature are in fact expressions of a desire that, like all desires, falls prey to the duplicities of expression. The so-called "idealism" of literature is then shown to be an idolatry, a fascination with a false image that mimics the presumed attributes of authenticity when it is in fact just the hollow mask with which a frustrated, defeated consciousness tries to cover up its own negativity.

Perhaps the most specific example of this strategy is the use made by structuralist critics of the historical term "romantic"; the example also has the virtue of revealing the historical scheme within which they are operating, and which is not always openly stated. The fallacy of the belief that, in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide, or at least be related to each other in the free and harmonious balance that we call beauty, is said to be a specifically romantic delusion. The unity of appearance (sign) and idea (meaning)—to use the terminology that one finds indeed among the theoreticians of romanticism when they speak of *Schein* and *Idee*—is said to be a romantic myth embodied in the recurrent topos of the "Beautiful Soul." The *schöne Seele*, a predominant theme of pietistic origin in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, functions indeed as the *figura* of a privileged kind of language. Its outward apparance receives its beauty from an inner glow (or *feu sacré*) to which it is so finely attuned that, far from hiding it from sight, it gives it just the right balance of opacity and transparency, thus allowing the holy fire to shine without burning. The romantic imagination embodies this figure at times in the shape of a person, feminine, masculine or hermaphrodite, and seems to suggest that it exists as an actual, empirical subject: one thinks, for instance, of Rousseau's Julie, of Hölderlin's Diotima, or of the beautiful soul that appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

At this point, it is an irresistible temptation for the demystifying critic, from Voltaire down to the present, to demonstrate that this person, this actual subject, becomes ludicrous when it is transplanted in the fallen world of our facticity. The beautiful soul can be shown to spring from fantasies by means of which the writer sublimates his own shortcomings; it suffices to remove the entity for a moment from the fictional world in which it exists to make it appear even more ridiculous than Candide. Some authors, writing in the wake of the romantic myth, have been well aware of this. One can see how certain developments in nineteenth-century realism, the ironic treatment of the Rousseauistic figure by Stendhal, of the quixotic figure by Flaubert, or of the "poetic" figure by Proust, can be interpreted as a gradual demystification of romantic idealism. This leads to a historical scheme in which romanticism represents, so to speak, the point of maximum delusion in our recent past, whereas the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represent a gradual emerging from this aberration, culminating in the breakthrough of the last decades that inaugurates a new form of insight and lucidity, a cure from the agony of the romantic disease. Refining on what may appear too crude in such a historical scheme, some modern critics transpose this movement within the consciousness of a single writer and show how the development of a novelist can best be understood as a successive process of

mystifications and partial demystifications. The process does not necessarily move in one single direction, from delusion to insight; there can be an intricate play of relapses and momentary recoveries. All the same, the fundamental movement of the literary mind espouses the pattern of a demystifying consciousness; literature finally comes into its own, and becomes authentic, when it discovers that the exalted status it claimed for its language was a myth. The function of the critic then naturally becomes coextensive with the intent at demystification that is more or less consciously present in the mind of the author.

This scheme is powerful and cogent, powerful enough, in fact, to go to the root of the matter and consequently to cause a crisis. To reject it convincingly would require elaborate argument. My remarks are meant to indicate some reasons, however, for considering the conception of literature (or literary criticism) as demystification the most dangerous myth of all, while granting that it forces us, in Mallarmé's terms, to scrutinize the act of writing "jusqu'en l'origine."

For reasons of economy, my starting point will have to be oblique, for in the language of polemics the crooked path often travels faster than the straight one. We must ask ourselves if there is not a recurrent epistemological structure that characterizes all statements made in the mood and the rhetoric of crisis. Let me take an example from philosophy. On May 7 and May 10 of 1935, Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, delivered in Vienna two lectures entitled "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity"; the title was later changed to "The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy," to stress the priority of the concept of crisis as Husserl's main concern. The lectures are the first version of what was to become Husserl's most important later work, the treatise entitled *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,* now the sixth volume of the complete works edited by Walter Biemel. In these various titles, two words remain constant: the word "crisis" and the word "European"; it is in the interaction of these two concepts that the epistemological structure of the crisis-statement is fully revealed.

Reading this text with the hindsight that stems from more than thirty years of turbulent history, it strikes one as both prophetic

and tragic. Much of what is being stated seems relevant today. It is not by a mere freak of language that the key word "demythification" (*Entmythisierung*), that was destined to have such an important career, appears in the text (VI.340.4), although the context in which the term is used, designating what takes place when the superior theoretical man observes the inferior natural man, is highly revealing. There is a very modern note in Husserl's description of philosophy as a process by means of which naïve assumptions are made accessible to consciousness by an act of critical self-understanding. Husserl conceived of philosophy primarily as a self-interpretation by means of which we eliminate what he calls *Selbstverhülltheit,* the tendency of the self to hide from the light it can cast on itself. The universality of philosophical knowledge stems from a persistently reflective attitude that can take philosophy itself for its theme. He describes philosophy as a prolegomenon to a new kind of praxis, a "universal critique of all life and all the goals of life, of all the man-created cultural systems and achievements" and, consequently, "a criticism of man himself (*Kritik der Menschheit selbst*) and of the values by which he is consciously or pre-consciously being governed."

Alerted by this convincing appeal to self-critical vigilance, Husserl's listeners and his present-day readers may well be tempted to turn this philosophical criticism on Husserl's own text, especially on the numerous sections in which philosophy is said to be the historical privilege of European man. Husserl speaks repeatedly of non-European cultures as primitive, prescientific and pre-philosophical, myth-dominated and congenitally incapable of the disinterested distance without which there can be no philosophical meditation. This, although by his own definition philosophy, as unrestricted reflection upon the self, necessarily tends toward a universality that finds its concrete, geographical correlative in the formation of supratribal, supernational communities such as, for instance, Europe. Why this geographical expansion should have chosen to stop, once and forever, at the Atlantic Ocean and at the Caucasus, Husserl does not say. No one could be more open to Lévi-Strauss' criticism of the mystified anthropologist than Husserl when he warns us, with the noblest of intentions, that we should not assume a potential for philosophical attitudes in non-

European cultures. The privileged viewpoint of the post-Hellenic, European consciousness is never for a moment put into question; the crucial, determining examination on which depends Husserl's right to call himself, by his own terms, a philosopher, is in fact never undertaken. As a European, it seems that Husserl escapes from the necessary self-criticism that is prior to all philosophical truth about the self. He is committing precisely the mistake that Rousseau did not commit when he carefully avoided giving his concept of natural man, the basis of his anthropology, any empirical status whatever. Husserl's claim to European supremacy hardly stands in need of criticism today. Since we are speaking of a man of superior good will, it suffices to point to the pathos of such a claim at a moment when Europe was about to destroy itself as center in the name of its unwarranted claim to be the center.

The point, however, transcends the personal situation. Speaking in what was in fact a state of urgent personal and political crisis about a more general form of crisis, Husserl's text reveals with striking clarity the structure of all crisis-determined statements. It establishes an important truth: the fact that philosophical knowledge can only come into being when it is turned back upon itself. But it immediately proceeds, in the very same text, to do the opposite. The rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error. It is itself radically blind to the light it emits. It could be shown that the same is true of Mallarmé's *Crise de vers*, which served as our original starting point—although it would be a great deal more complex to demonstrate the self-mystification of as ironical a man as Mallarmé than of as admirably honest a man as Husserl.

Our question, rather, is the following: How does this pattern of self-mystification that accompanies the experience of crisis apply to literary criticism? Husserl was demonstrating the urgent philosophical necessity of putting the privileged European standpoint into question, but remained himself entirely blind to this necessity, behaving in the most unphilosophical way possible at the very moment when he rightly understood the primacy of philosophical over empirical knowledge. He was, in fact, stating the privileged status of philosophy as an authentic language, but withdrawing

at once from the demands of this authenticity as it applied to himself. Similarly, demystifying critics are in fact asserting the privileged status of literature as an authentic language, but withdrawing from the implications by cutting themselves off from the source from which they receive their insight.

For the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression. All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite. Yet the truth emerges in the foreknowledge we possess of the true nature of literature when we refer to it as *fiction*. All literatures, including the literature of Greece, have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction; in the *Iliad*, when we first encounter Helen, it is as the emblem of the narrator weaving the actual war into the tapestry of a fictional object. Her beauty prefigures the beauty of all future narratives as entities that point to their own fictional nature. The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence. It is always against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave. "Le pays des chimères est en ce monde le seul digne d'être habité," Rousseau has Julie write, "et tel est le néant des choses humaines qu'hors l'Etre existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas" (*La Nouvelle Heloïse*, Pléiade ed. II, 693). One entirely misunderstands this assertion of the priority of fiction over reality, of imagination over perception, if one considers it as the compensatory expression of a shortcoming, of a deficient sense of reality. It is attributed to a fictional character who knows all there is to know of human happiness and who is about to face death with Socratic equanimity. It transcends the notion of a nostalgia or a desire, since it discovers desire as a fundamental pattern of being that discards any possibility of satisfaction. Elsewhere, Rousseau

speaks in similar terms of the nothingness of fiction (*le néant de mes chimères*): "If all my dreams had turned into reality, I would still remain unsatisfied: I would have kept on dreaming, imagining, desiring. In myself, I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have filled; a longing of the heart towards another kind of fulfillment of which I could not conceive but of which I nevertheless felt the attraction" (Letter to Malesherbes, Pléiade ed. I, 1140).

These texts can be called romantic, and I have purposely chosen them within the period and the author that many consider the most deluded of all. But one hesitates to use terms such as nostalgia or desire to designate this kind of consciousness, for all nostalgia or desire is desire of something or for someone; here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. In the same manner that the poetic lyric originates in moments of tranquility, in the absence of actual emotions, and then proceeds to invent fictional emotions to create the illusion of recollection, the work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. It is not a demystification, it is demystified from the start. When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it; but since this necessarily occurs in the form of a crisis, they are blind to what takes place within themselves. At the moment that they claim to do away with literature, literature is everywhere; what they call anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis is nothing but literature reappearing, like the Hydra's head, in the very spot where it had supposedly been suppressed. The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing "the nothingness of human matters." In order not to see that the failure lies in the nature of things, one chooses to locate it in the individual, "romantic" subject, and thus retreats behind a historical scheme which, apocalyptic as it may sound, is basically reassuring and bland.

Lévi-Strauss had to give up the notion of subject to safeguard

reason. The subject, he said, in fact, is a "foyer virtuel," a mere hypothesis posited by the scientists to give consistency to the behavior of entities. The metaphor in his statement that "the reflective activities [of the structuralists] deal with light that issues from a virtual focal point . . ." stems from the elementary laws of optical refraction. The image is all the more striking since it plays on the confusion between the imaginary loci of the physicist and the *fictional* entities that occur in literary language. The virtual focus is a quasi-objective structure posited to give rational integrity to a process that exists independently of the self. The subject merely fills in, with the dotted line of geometrical construction, what natural reason had not bothered to make explicit; it has a passive and unproblematic role. The "virtual focus" is, strictly speaking, a nothing, but its nothingness concerns us very little, since a mere act of reason suffices to give it a mode of being that leaves the rational order unchallenged. The same is not true of the imaginary source of fiction. Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability. Lévi-Strauss' suppression of the subject is perfectly legitimate as an attempt to protect the scientific status of ethnology; by the same token, however, it leads directly into the larger question of the ontological status of the self. From this point on, a philosophical anthropology would be inconceivable without the consideration of literature as a primary source of knowledge.

II

Form and Intent in the American New Criticism

Not longer than ten years ago, a comparison of American and European criticism would in all likelihood have had to focus on the differences between a stylistic and a historical approach to literature. In evaluating what American criticism stood to gain from a closer contact with Europe, one would have stressed the balance achieved in some of the best European works between historical knowledge and a genuine feeling for literary form. For reasons that are themselves part of history, the same synthesis was rarely achieved in America; the intellectual history that originated with Lovejoy and that could have combined a European sense of history with an American sense of form was the exception rather than the norm. The predominant influence, that of the New Criticism, was never able to overcome the anti-historical bias that presided over its beginnings. This inability certainly was one of the reasons that prevented it from making major contributions, in spite of considerable methodological originality and refinement.

One can think of several ways in which a closer contact with European methods could have contributed to a broadening of

the New Critical approach. Opportunities for such contacts were never lacking. After all, some of the most representative European historians, as well as some of the best practitioners of contemporary stylistics, spent much time in America: one thinks of Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, Georges Poulet, Damaso Alonso, Roman Jakobson, and several others. That their influence remained by and large confined to their national field of specialization indicates how difficult it is to break down the barriers that, in our universities, keep the various departments separated from each other. Perhaps American formalism needed this isolation to come fully into its own. Whatever the case may be, even when the influence of the New Criticism reached its height, it remained confined within its original boundaries and was allowed to do so without being seriously challenged.

Such a challenge could have come from various sources, without really having to upset the traditional patterns of literary studies. But today, it is too late to bring about this kind of encounter. One can regret this, yet an analysis of the causes that prevented the confrontation is purely academic. Over the last five years, a far-reaching change has taken place here and abroad, putting the entire question of literary studies in a different perspective. Whether American or European, whether oriented toward form or toward history, the main critical approaches of the last decades were all founded on the implicit assumption that literature is an autonomous activity of the mind, a distinctive way of being in the world to be understood in terms of its own purposes and intentions. This autonomy is now again being successfully challenged. Contemporary French structuralism applies methodological patterns derived from the social sciences (especially anthropology and linguistics) to the study of literature; similar tendencies can be observed in the renewed interest of American critics in sociological, political, and psychological considerations that had never ceased to be present, but had been kept in the background. Ironically enough, the long-awaited unification of European and American criticism seems to be coming about, albeit in the form of a radical questioning of the autonomy of literature as an aesthetic activity.

The trend can be welcomed, though not uncritically. It forces

a long overdue re-examination of the assumptions on which the position of autonomy was founded, for it is not at all certain that this position had been well understood by the American formalists; their conviction may very well have been founded on preconceptions that were themselves derived from non-literary models. The kind of autonomy to be found in literary works is certainly far from self-evident; it has to be redefined before we can ask whether it is being challenged in the name of regressive trends, methods that apply to less rigorous modes of consciousness than those at work in literary language. As one of the questions that can give insight into this matter, the nature of the relationship between form and intent provides a possible way of approach.

We can take as a point of departure a remark of the English semanticist Stephen Ullmann in a work on the stylistics of French fiction. Ullmann is led to a discussion of the method of Leo Spitzer and speaks of the rebuke that is frequently addressed to Spitzer; namely, that his apparently objective philological analyses are, in fact, *a posteriori* rationalizations of emotional convictions that he held long beforehand. Ullmann writes:

> Professor Spitzer has strongly repudiated this allegation; but even if it is true, it does not really affect the value of the method. As long as the demonstration is conclusive, it surely does not matter in what order the various steps were taken; the main point is that a link has been established between a stylistic peculiarity, its root in the author's psyche, and other manifestations of the same mental factor. The great merit of Spitzer's procedure is indeed that it has lifted stylistic facts out of their isolation and has related them to other aspects of the writer's experience and activity.[1]

Interpreted in a certain way—which is not necessarily how Mr. Ullmann intends it—this affirmation postulates a continuity between the initial subjective experience of the writer and characteristics that belong to the surface dimensions of language—such as properties of sound, of meter, or even of imagery, all of which belong to the domain of sensory experience. This continuity implies a debatable presupposition about the nature of literary language. The formula is tempting for it seems to dispense with adventurous inquiries that reach into the darker areas of human subjectivity and to leave us instead in a clear and precise zone in which properties can be observed and even measured. But can we take this continuity between depth and surface, between style and theme, for granted? Is it not rather the most problematic issue with which the theory of poetry will have to deal?

1. Stephen Ullmann, *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), pp. 28–29.

In another work—historical and thematic in scope rather than purely stylistic—Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, the author, in speaking of the tension that exists in Western literature between the Biblical and the Hellenic traditions, characterizes Western literature as a "struggle between sensory appearance and meaning (Kampf zwischen sinnlicher Erscheinung und Bedeutung) which pervades the Christian sense of reality from the beginning and, in truth, in its totality." [2] And, as is clear from the context, the "meaning" to which Auerbach alludes here is not just the immediate semantic *donnée* of a text but the deeper inward experience that determines the choice and articulation of the themes. However, if this is indeed the case, the study of the "sensory appearances" that is the field of stylistics can never lead to the real meaning of the themes since both, at least in Western literature, are separated by a radical discontinuity that no dialectic is able to bridge. It would be of the utmost importance, in that case, to know whether Leo Spitzer has taken a subjective or a sensory element for his point of departure since we would end up, in each case, in the opposite camp.

It is easy to see to what species of entities Ullmann's description does apply. Certain entities exist the full meaning of which can be said to be equal to the totality of their sensory appearances. For an ideal perception, entirely devoid of complications resulting from the interference of the imagination, the "meaning" of "stone" could only refer to a totality of sensory appearances. The same applies to all natural objects. But even the most purely intuitive consciousness could never conceive of the significance of an object such as, for instance, a chair, without including in the description

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Bern, 1946), Chapter II, p. 55.

an allusion to the *use* to which it is put; the most rigorous description of the perceptions of the object "chair" would remain meaningless if one does not organize them in function of the potential act that defines the object; namely, that it is destined to be sat on. The potential act of sitting down is a constitutive part of the object. If it were absent, the object could not be conceived in its totality. The difference between the stone and the chair distinguishes a natural object from an intentional object. The intentional object requires a reference to a specific act as constitutive of its mode of being. By asserting *a priori,* as in Ullmann's text, that, in literary language, the meaning is equal to the totality of the sensory appearances, one postulates in fact that the language of literature is of the same order, ontologically speaking, as a natural object. The intentional factor has been bypassed.

A clarification of the notion of "intent" is of great importance for an evaluation of American criticism, for at the rare moments when the New Critics consented to express themselves theoretically, the notion of intent always played a prominent part, although it was mostly a negative one. Wimsatt and Beardsley coined the expression "intentional fallacy" as far back as 1942 and this formula, better than any other, delimits the horizon within which this criticism has operated. The expression was developed later on by Wimsatt in his book *The Verbal Icon,* where it is used to assert the autonomy and the unity of the poetic consciousness. Wimsatt wants to defend the province of poetry against the intrusion of crude deterministic systems, historical or psychological, that oversimplify the complex relationship between theme and style. And he focuses on the concept of intention as the breach through which these foreign bodies reach into the poetic domain. But, in so doing, he allows us to observe the very moment at which his concern with autonomy, most legitimate in itself, leads him into contradictory assumptions about the ontological status of the work of literature. Too sensitive an aesthetician to distort things altogether, Wimsatt writes at first: "the poem conceived as a thing in between the poet and the audience is, of course, an abstraction. The poem is an act"—a statement to which an intentional theory of poetry would gladly subscribe. Then Wimsatt continues: "But if we are to lay hold of the poetic act to comprehend and evaluate

it, and if it has to pass current as critical object, it must be hypostatized." [3]

If such a hypostasis, which changes the literary act into a literary object by the suppression of its intentional character, is not only possible but necessary in order to allow for a critical description, then we have not left the world in which the status of literary language is similar to that of a natural object. This assumption rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of intentionality. "Intent" is seen, by analogy with a physical model, as a transfer of a psychic or mental content that exists in the mind of the poet to the mind of a reader, somewhat as one would pour wine from a jar into a glass. A certain content has to be transferred elsewhere, and the energy necessary to effect the transfer has to come from an outside source called intention. This is to ignore that the concept of intentionality is neither physcial nor psychological in its nature, but structural, involving the activity of a subject regardless of its empirical concerns, except as far as they relate to the intentionality of the structure. The structural intentionality determines the relationship between the components of the resulting object in all its parts, but the relationship of the particular state of mind of the person engaged in the act of structurization to the structured object is altogether contingent. The structure of the chair is determined in all its components by the fact that it is destined to be sat on, but this structure in no way depends on the state of mind of the carpenter who is in the process of assembling its parts. The case of the work of literature is of course more complex, yet here also, the intentionality of the act, far from threatening the unity of the poetic entity, more definitely establishes this unity.

The rejection of intentionality, by which Wimsatt formulated theoretically what other New Critics were practicing, has proven to be remarkably tenacious. In *The Anatomy of Criticism,* Northrop Frye still refers to the "intentional fallacy" as one of the methodological cornerstones of his system of archetypal rhetorical categories. His formulation seems to be closer to Wimsatt's "act" than to his hypostatized "thing." Frye sees the structure of an inten-

3. William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), Chapter I, p. xvii.

tional act as analogous to that of taking aim, as when an object is taken for a target by a weapon directed toward it.[4] He concludes that this type of structure belongs to discursive language which "aims" for the exact relationship and not to poetic language which does not "aim" at anything, being tautologically itself; that is to say, entirely autonomous and without exterior referent. This part of Frye's theory—which hardly detracts from the suggestive value of his further classifications—is founded on a misunderstanding of intentional language and, be it said in passing, of discursive language as well. Up to a point, the act of taking aim provides a correct model for an intentional act, provided an important distinction is made. When a hunter takes aim at a rabbit, we may presume his intention is to eat or to sell the rabbit and, in that case the act of taking aim is subordinated to another intention that exists beyond the act itself. But when he takes aim at an artificial target, his act has no other intention than aim-taking for its own sake and constitutes a perfectly closed and autonomous structure. The act reflects back upon itself and remains circumscribed within the range of its own intent. This is indeed a proper way of distinguishing between different intentional objects such as the tool (the gun that takes aim at the rabbit) and the toy (the gun that takes aim at a clay pipe). The aesthetic entity definitely belongs to the same class as the toy, as Kant and Schiller knew well before Huizinga. In failing to make this distinction, Northrop Frye falls into exactly the same error as Wimsatt and reifies the literary entity into a natural object: with the added danger, moreover, that put in less ironic hands than his own, his theory could cause much more extensive damage. A formalist such as Wimsatt hypostatizes only the particular text on which he is working, but a literal minded disciple of a mythologist like Frye could go a lot further. He is given license to order and classify the whole of literature into one single thing which, even though circular, would nevertheless be a gigantic cadaver. Frye's formula defining all literary creation as "an activity whose intention it is to abolish intention" [5] is only sound if it is allowed to remain forever suspended as an eternal intent.

A truly systematic study of the main formalist critics in the

4. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 86.
5. *Ibid.* p. 89.

English language during the last thirty years would always reveal the more or less deliberate rejection of the principle of intentionality. The result would be a hardening of the text into a sheer surface that prevents the stylistic analysis from penetrating beyond the sensory appearances to perceive this "struggle with meaning" of which all criticism, including the criticism of forms, should give an account. For surfaces also remain concealed when they are being artificially separated from the depth that supports them. The partial failure of American formalism, which has not produced works of major magnitude, is due to its lack of awareness of the intentional structure of literary form.

Yet this criticism has merits that prevail despite the weakness of its theoretical foundations. The French critic, Jean-Pierre Richard, alludes to these merits when he writes defensively in the introduction to his study of Mallarmé that "the reproach [of destroying the formal structure of the work] will especially be made by English and American critics for whom, as is well known, the objective and architectural reality of particular works is of the utmost importance." [6] It is true that American textual interpretation and "close reading" have perfected techniques that allow for considerable refinement in catching the details and nuances of literary expression. They study texts as "forms," as groupings from which the constitutive parts cannot be isolated or separated. This gives a sense of context that is often lacking in French or in German interpretations.

But are we not confronted here with a flagrant contradiction? On the one hand, we blame American criticism for considering literary texts as if they were natural objects but, on the other hand, we praise it for possessing a sense of formal unity that belongs precisely to a living and natural organism. Is not this sense of the unity of forms being supported by the large metaphor of the analogy between language and a living organism, a metaphor that shapes a great deal of nineteenth-century poetry and thought? One could even find historical confirmation of this filiation in the line that links, especially by way of I. A. Richards and Whitehead, the structural formalism of the New Critics to the "organic" im-

6. Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris, 1961), p. 31.

agination so dear to Coleridge. The introduction of the principle of intentionality would imperil the organic analogy and lead to a loss of the sense of form; hence the understandable need of the New Critics to protect their greatest source of strength.

It should be remembered that, going back to Coleridge himself, what he called the "esemplastic" power of the imagination was not unambiguously founded on a participation of consciousness in the natural energy of the cosmos. M. H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, rightly insists on the importance of free will in Coleridge. "Coleridge," he writes, "though admitting an unconscious component in invention, was determined to demonstrate that a poet like Shakespeare 'never wrote anything without design.' What the plant is by an act not its own and unconsciously, Coleridge exhorts us 'that must thou *make* thyself to become' " [7] And, in *La Métamorphose du cercle*, Georges Poulet, speaking of Coleridge's sense of form, insists that it results from "the explicit action of our will" which "imposes its law and unique form upon the poetic universe." [8] This is to say that the structural power of the poetic imagination is not founded on an analogy with nature, but that it is intentional. Abrams perceives this very well when he comments that Coleridge's notion of free will "runs counter, it would appear, to an inherent tendency of his elected analogue." [9]

The ambivalence reappears among modern disciples of Coleridge, in a curious discrepancy between their theoretical assumptions and their practical results. As it refines its interpretations more and more, American criticism does not discover a single meaning, but a plurality of significations that can be radically opposed to each other. Instead of revealing a continuity affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity. Almost in spite of itself, it pushes the interpretative process so far that the analogy between the organic world and the language of poetry finally explodes. This unitarian criticism finally becomes a criticism of ambiguity, an ironic reflection on the absence of the unity it had postulated.

But from where then does the contextual unity, which the

7. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1953), pp. 173–74.
8. Georges Poulet, *La Métamorphose du cercle* (Paris, 1961), p. 154.
9. Abrams, *op. cit.* p. 174.

study of texts reconfirms over and over again and to which American criticism owes its effectiveness, stem? Is it not rather that this unity—which is in fact a semi-circularity—resides not in the poetic text as such, but in the act of interpreting this text? The circle we find here and which is called "form" does not stem from an analogy between the text and natural things, but constitutes the hermeneutic circle mentioned by Spitzer[10] of which the history has been traced by Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode*[11] and whose ontological significance is at the basis of Heidegger's treatise *Sein und Zeit*.

What happened in American criticism could then be explained as follows: because such patient and delicate attention was paid to the reading of forms, the critics pragmatically entered into the hermeneutic circle of interpretation, mistaking it for the organic circularity of natural processes. This happened quite spontaneously, for Spitzer's influence at the time of the New Criticism was confined to a small area, and Heidegger's influence was nonexistent.

Only some aspects of Heidegger's theory of hermeneutic circularity have to be stressed here. It combines in fact two equally important ideas. The first has to do with the epistemological nature of all interpretation. Contrary to what happens in the physical sciences, the interpretation of an intentional act or an intentional object always implies an *understanding* of the intent. Like scientific laws, interpretation is in fact a generalization that expands the range of applicability of a statement to a wider area. But the nature of the generalization is altogether different from what is most frequently encountered in the natural sciences. There we are concerned with the predictability, the measurement, or the mode of determination of a given phenomenon, but we do not claim in any way to understand it. To interpret an intent, however, can only mean to understand it. No new set of relationships is added to an existing reality, but relationships *that were already there* are being disclosed, not only in themselves (like the events of nature) but as they exist *for us*. We can only understand that which is in

10. Leo Spitzer, *A Method of Interpreting Literature* (Northampton, Mass., 1949).
11. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960).

a sense already given to us and already known, albeit in a fragmentary, inauthentic way that cannot be called unconscious. Heidegger calls this the *Forhabe*, the forestructure of all understanding.

> This is a fact [he writes], that has always been remarked, even if only in the area of derivative ways of understanding and interpretation, such as philological interpretation. . . .
>
> Scientific knowledge demands the rigors of demonstration for its justification. In a scientific proof, we may not presuppose what it is our task to demonstrate. But if interpretation must in any case operate in the area of what is already understood, and if it must feed on this understanding, how can it achieve any scientific results without moving in a circle? . . . Yet, according to the most elementary rules of logic, this circle is a *circulus vitiosus*. But if we think this to be a vicious circle and try to avoid it, even if we merely suspect it of being an imperfection, then the act of understanding has been entirely misunderstood. . . . If the basic conditions that make interpretation possible are to be fulfilled, we must recognize from the start the circumstances under which it can be performed. What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. The circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge is allowed to move; it is the expression of the existential forestructure of *Dasein* itself. . . . In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowledge.[12]

For the interpreter of a poetic text, this foreknowledge is the text itself. Once he understands the text, the implicit knowledge becomes explicit and discloses what was already there in full light. Far from being something added to the text, the elucidating commentary simply tries to reach the text itself, whose full richness is there at the start. Ultimately, the ideal commentary would indeed become superfluous and merely allow the text to stand fully revealed. But it goes without saying that this ideal commentary can never exist as such. When Heidegger, in his foreword to his commentaries on the poetry of Hölderlin, claims to write from the standpoint of the ideal commentator, his claim is disquieting

12. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), I, Chapter V.

because it goes against the temporal structure of the hermeneutic process. The implicit foreknowledge is always temporally ahead of the explicit interpretative statement that tries to catch up with it.

The notion of the hermeneutic circle is not introduced by Heidegger in connection with poetry or the interpretation of poetry, but applied to language in general. All language is, to some extent, involved in interpretation, though all language certainly does not achieve understanding. Here the second element of the hermeneutic process comes into play: the notion of circularity or totality. Only when understanding has been achieved does the circle seem to close and only then is the foreknowing structure of the act of interpretation fully revealed. True understanding always implies a certain degree of totality; without it, no contact could be established with a foreknowledge that it can never reach, but of which it can be more or less lucidly aware. The fact that poetic language, unlike ordinary language, possesses what we call "form" indicates that it has reached this point. In interpreting poetic language, and especially in revealing its "form," the critic is therefore dealing with a privileged language: a language engaged in its highest intent and tending toward the fullest possible self-understanding. The critical interpretation is oriented toward a consciousness which is itself engaged in an act of total interpretation. The relationship between author and critic does not designate a difference in the type of activity involved, since no fundamental discontinuity exists between two acts that both aim at full understanding; the difference is primarily temporal in kind. Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism. Far from changing or distorting it, criticism merely discloses poetry for what it is.

Literary "form" is the result of the dialectic interplay between the prefigurative structure of the foreknowledge and the intent at totality of the interpretative process. This dialectic is difficult to grasp. The idea of totality suggests closed forms that strive for ordered and consistent systems and have an almost irresistible tendency to transform themselves into objective structures. Yet, the temporal factor, so persistently forgotten, should remind us that the form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion. The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work that could coincide with a sensorial or semantic dimen-

sion of the language. It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning. But this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless. The hermeneutic understanding is always, by its very nature, lagging behind: to understand something is to realize that one had always known it, but, at the same time, to face the mystery of this hidden knowledge. Understanding can be called complete only when it becomes aware of its own temporal predicament and realizes that the horizon within which the totalization can take place is time itself. The act of understanding is a temporal act that has its own history, but this history forever eludes totalization. Whenever the circle seems to close, one has merely ascended or descended one more step on Mallarmé's "spirale vertigineuse conséquente."

The lesson to be derived from the evolution of American formalist criticism is twofold. It reaffirms first of all the necessary presence of a totalizing principle as the guiding impulse of the critical process. In the New Criticism, this principle consisted of a purely empirical notion of the integrity of literary form, yet the mere presence of such a principle could lead to the disclosure of distinctive structures of literary language (such as ambiguity and irony) although these structures contradict the very premises on which the New Criticism was founded. Second, the rejection of the principle of intentionality, dismissed as fallacious, prevented the integration of these discoveries within a truly coherent theory of literary form. The ambivalence of American formalism is such that it was bound to lead to a state of paralysis. The problem remains how to formulate the mode of totalization that applies to literary language and that allows for a description of its distinctive aspects.

Some similarities can be pointed out between the successes and the shortcomings of the American New Criticism and corresponding developments in present-day French criticism. The danger of a reification of the form also seems to threaten the declared objectivism of several structuralist interpreters of literature. Yet the theoretical foundations of the two trends have by now moved in very different directions. In structuralism the loss of the intentional factor does not result from a debatable identification of language

with the organic world but is due to the suppression of the constitutive subject. The consequences of this suppression reach much further than in the relatively harmless case of an organicist formalism. A material analogism, as one finds it in the criticism of Bachelard or of Jean-Pierre Richard, can leave the play of the poetic imagination quite free. As long as the theoretical assumptions remain weak and loose, the hermeneutic process can take place more or less unhampered. But the theoretical assumptions that underlie the methods of structuralism are a great deal more powerful and consistent. They cannot be dealt with in the course of a single brief essay.

The critical examination of the structuralist premises will have to focus on the same set of problems that appeared in the discussion of formalism: the existence and the nature of the constitutive subject, the temporal structure of the act of interpretation, the necessity for a distinctively literary mode of totalization. It could be that, in a legitimate desire to react against reductive ways of thought, the structuralists have bypassed or oversimplified some of these questions.[13]

In the first critical reactions to arise in response to the structuralist challenge, it is primarily the question of the subject that has been stressed. Thus Serge Doubrovsky, in the first volume of a general study on modern French criticism, re-establishes the link between literary totality and the intent of the writer or subject. This intent is conceived in Sartrian terms, with a definite awareness of the temporal complexities involved in the process of interpretation. It is doubtful, however, if Doubrovsky remains faithful to the demands of literary language when he defines its intentionality as the act of an individual "projecting the original relations between man and reality, the total sense of the human condition, on the level of the imagination (le plan de l'imaginaire)."[14] What is this "plan de l'imaginaire" that seems to exist by itself, independently of language, and why would we need to "project" ourselves upon it? Doubrovsky answers these questions by referring to the theories of perception contained in the work of Merleau-Ponty. He describes all expression as being at the same time dis-

13. The question is discussed in more detail in Chapter VII of this study.
14. Serge Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi la nouvelle critique?* (Paris, 1966), p. 193.

closure as well as dissimulation; the function of art and of literature would be to reveal the reality that is hidden as well as that which is visible. The world of the imagination then becomes a more complete, more totalized reality than that of everyday experience, a three-dimensional reality that would add a factor of depth to the flat surface with which we are usually confronted. Art would be the expression of a completed reality, a kind of over-perception which, as in the famous Rilke poem on the "Archaic Torso of Apollo" would allow us to see things in their completeness and so "change our lives."

The reference to Merleau-Ponty reveals that Doubrovsky has chosen perception as a model for his description of the literary act. And what characterizes perception for Merleau-Ponty is that the intent and the content of the act can be co-extensive.[15] Not only does Doubrovsky accept this essentially positive concept of perception with much less dialectical anxiety than his master, but he extends it at once to include all facets of our relationships toward the world. From being a model for the act of literary invention, perception is extended to coincide in its structure with the entirety of the existential project. It makes our entire existence benefit from the plenitude of an original act, the cogito "I percieve, therefore, I am" experienced as an unquestionable assertion of being. Consequently, the real and the imaginary, the life and the work, history and transcendence, literature and criticism, are all harmoniously integrated in an infinite extension of the perfect unity that stands at the beginning of things.

In so doing, Doubrovsky pushes Merleau-Ponty's thought far beyond its prudent limits. The author of *The Phenomenology of Perception* had sketched the outline of a theory of plastic form in the late essay, *Eye and Mind,* but he refrained from extending his theory to include literary language. It would have been difficult for him to do so, for literature bears little resemblance to perception, and less still to this over-perception of which Doubrovsky is dreaming. It does not fulfill a plenitude but originates in the void that separates intent from reality. The imagination takes its flight only after the void, the inauthenticity of the existential

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, 1952), III, Chapter I, "Le cogito."

project has been revealed; literature begins where the existential demystification ends and the critic has no need to linger over this preliminary stage. Considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint. These regressive stages can only reveal an emptiness of which the writer himself is well aware when he begins to write. Many great writers have described the loss of reality that marks the beginning of poetic states of mind, as when, in a famous poem by Baudelaire,

> . . . palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
> Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie. . . .

This "allegorical" dimension, which appears in the work of all genuine writers and constitutes the real depth of literary insight could never be reached by a method like that of Serge Doubrovsky, for it originates on the far side of the existential project. The critic who has written some of the most perceptive pages on Baudelaire, the German essayist Walter Benjamin, knew this very well when he defined allegory as a void "that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents." We are far removed from the plenitude of perception that Doubrovsky attributes to Merleau-Ponty. But we are much closer to the process of negative totalization that American criticism discovered when it penetrated more or less unwittingly into the temporal labyrinth of interpretation.