

INSTINCTS AND POETRY

I. INDIVIDUALITY OR TOTALITY?

It may be a temptation to build the science of letters upon the concept of individuality. In this case the researcher tries to isolate the qualities which distinguish one work from other works by the same author, and these works from those of his contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. This approach evokes objections of a logical and of an empirical kind.

The individuality of a being, resulting from the infinity of his attributes, cannot be formulated: this is the a priori objection. Furthermore, it is well known that literary sensibility is incapable of resolving problems of attribution. If a trained reader never runs the risk of attributing a sentence of Mallarmé's to Stendhal, yet it is always possible to dig up a minor writer whose style or subject-matter will not allow him to be distinguished from a well-known writer. Give a discriminating scholar 10 lines of Quinault, and he is just as likely to attribute them to Racine. Who can boast that he will not attribute to Stendhal such and such a sentence of R. Vailland? Why do we pretend not to know

Translated by Lisa Pasternak Slater.

that Goethe's contemporaries bestowed on him the paternity of the novels of Caroline von Lengefeld, Schiller's sister-in-law? And why do theorists of literary criticism throw a chaste veil over the problem raised by forgers? The success of a forger ruins the concept of individuality, but the ill-temper with which we persecute the hoaxer is sign enough of the extent to which this concept is necessary for our pride and our security.¹

This empirical objection is confirmed by the methods resorted to, in order to resolve the problems of attribution. Far from appealing to the sensibilities of a cultivated reader, a computer is mobilised. This exploits textual characteristics which are imperceptible to literary sensibilities. Details indiscernible to man are treated as relevant by the machine. In other words, the most objective basis² of a text's individuality has no existence for the recipient, for whom the text was written:³ the most certain criteria are still the chemical composition of the ink and paper. True, we manage to guess the author by a sentence we have never read before. But this success simply proves that the organiser of a quotations quiz has a level of culture as low as our own. When value judgements have reduced the body of the 19th century to the works of some fifteen authors, the problems of attribution are considerably simplified. But if society has every interest in collecting its literate members into a common adherence to the classics, and a common ignorance of every great non-classic, science, to make up for this, cannot resign itself to submitting to limits so oppressive to its universal curiosity.

There remains the legitimacy of such methods as set out to describe the styles of particular schools. A similar ambition seems to evade the objections made above: the styles of different schools indeed present blatant characteristics, of which the consumer is aware. If the enquiry is carried out properly, mistakes are impossible: a sample of classic prose has little chance of being

¹ A spectacular example occurs in Arthur Koestler, "Anatomie des Snobismus," *Der Monat*, 1957/58. Reprinted in, *Über den Snob*, Piper, Munich, 1962, p. 57 f.

² Even this basis is hypothetical: assurance is never complete, as can be deduced from the logical objection formulated above.

³ Such as the average length of words. And when the machine treats qualities more perceptible to the reader (such as the average length of sentences), it notices quantitative differences which escape the most perceptive of readers.

taken for a sample of impressionist prose, and if the statistics supplied by J. Cohen⁴ have the merit of giving a numerical basis to the individuality of literary schools, they have the even greater merit of enumerating the occurrences of elements *important to sensitive readers of literature*.

But just as the individuality of an author is only perceptible within the limits of a minute corpus, so the individuality of a school is only perceptible within a conveniently limited chronological cross-section. Proof of this lies in the interminable controversy fed by the definition of the concept of "Baroque," and the limitless extensions of the concept of "Mannerism."⁵ If the definition of a school is not matched with chronological limits, which are always arbitrary, the school's individuality falls apart in just the same way as the writer's individuality.

A science of letters is therefore not viable unless it places its aspirations at the antipodes of the concept of individuality.⁶ We might have expected this; the driving force of scientific endeavour is the passion for unity. When G. Monod,⁷ would have it that the sole source of scientific research is the confrontation of logic and experience, he means that the investigator tries to substitute for the infinite diversity of things the unity of a conceptual system. The philosopher sees more clearly here than the scholar, since it would not be possible to express matters better than R. Caillois, who wrote in 1938: "Knowledge leads to the suppression of all distinctions, the reduction of all oppositions."⁸

Thus to contribute to a science of letters is to refuse the concept of individuality, and on the one hand to attempt to find a *unique* answer to the problem of understanding why there are people who write texts which are accepted as literary, and on the other hand to try to define the literary fact within the human, and then the biological one. There is no anthropology without zoology. If the science of letters is to be faithful to the idea of its conception,

⁴ *Structure du langage poétique*, Flammarion, Paris, 1966.

⁵ Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur*, Rohwolt, Hamburg.

⁶ We do not dispute the educational and social utility of such a concept, but its scientific validity.

⁷ *Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France*, November 1967.

⁸ *Le mythe et l'homme*, Gallimard, Les Essays, vi, p. 140.

it must regard itself as a branch of anthropology, and it cannot ignore any longer the study of animal behaviour. Soon enough we will not be able to speak of literature scientifically without being familiar with the works of Konrad Lorenz.⁹

Under the risk of being arbitrary, this totalitarian expansion of our ambitions demands a preliminary narrowing down of our approach. Our starting-point will be poetic language. *Language*, since we may thus dispose of formal, and hence objective criteria. *Poetic* language, since of all genres poetry is most manifestly literary. When "literary" is taken in a pejorative sense, "poetic" is its superlative. The third reason for our choice is the existence of the work of J. Cohen (*op. cit.*), which opens up for us the possibility for fundamental discussion.

II. J. COHEN AND POETIC LANGUAGE

J. Cohen sees poetic activity developing in two stages: a destructive and a constructive phase.

The efficaciousness of language as a means of communication is based upon the distinction of its constituent units:—that is, the distinction of phonemes via their relevant qualities, of words via phonemes, of groups of words via stresses and pauses, of subject matter and what is said via the intonation. Now poetic activity in its first phase attempts to blur characteristic boundaries: versification imposes a pause in a place where sense refuses it and allows none where it is demanded by the sense; rhyme and alliteration employ identical sounds for different meanings; the equality of lines of poetry, or, failing that, of stanzas, is monotonous, while the irregularity of sentences spoken for practical purposes holds the attention by their variety; the regular recurrence of a strong beat enforces the reader to stress units whose sense does not deserve this honour and to read without stress units that are informatively dense; poetic diction calls for uniform intonation, whereas practical diction varies the effects produced by intonation, according to the unpredictable demands of the

⁹ Especially, *Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*, Verlag Dr. G. Borothea-Schoeler, Wien, 1963 (20th edition in 1966). And above all: *Über tierisches und menschliches Verhalten. Aus dem Werdegang der Verhaltenslehre. Gesammelte Abhandlungen*. Piper, München, 1962, 2 vols.

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sense; the adjective does not go with its governing substantive (“Dark they walked in the lonely night”), or, on the other hand, belongs to its substantive to such a degree that it no longer supplies any information (Mallarmé’s “*Le bleu azur*”); the ego-centric terms (“I,” “here,” “today”) appear unexpectedly at the beginning of a poem, without the situation being given, for lack of which their function vanishes in nothingness: statements follow upon each other but do not interlink (“Ruth mused and Booz dreamed; the grass was black”); the nonevaluative epithet is placed before the noun, so that the reader’s first instinct should be either to take it for an adjective used as a substantive, or to give it an evaluative strength which it cannot carry “*Tendez vos rouges tabliers!*” The eleven processes we have just listed¹⁰ violate the rules of practical language and complicate the reception of the message. Can it be that the poet is merely a vandal?

Take the word “blue.” It denotes a part of the spectrum, between x and y microns. Apart from that, it connotes the emotional impression stimulated by the described object, and subsequently, by the word itself (even in the absence of the object). So, the connotation of “blue” has a sedative effect, as is supported by Matisse’s *The Blue Interior*, or *Window over Nice*. “Blue” points to the colour, and evokes tranquillity. The poet violates the denotative code: when Mallarmé writes “the blue angelus,” the adjective does not point to the colour, because the angelus cannot be coloured, seeing that it is only perceptible to the ear. But the elimination of the denotative function is the condition for the possibility of exercising the connotative function. It is only because “blue” does not point to the colour any longer that it can excite a sensation of tranquillity. Poetry violates the denotative code to make actual the connotative code; the absurd, on the other hand, violates both first and second.

Even though J. Cohen has performed an inestimable service to the science of letters by displaying the evidence, and quantifying the negativity of poetic endeavour, yet the further development of his argument, where he tries to display the final utility of poetic endeavour, can be objected to on three grounds.

The thesis according to which the denotative sense has to be

¹⁰ This resumé cannot be as convincing as the author’s exposition of his argument.

destroyed in order to activate the connotative sense is not proved. Quite the contrary: the emotive value of the word "blue" is based on the effect activated by the blue object. If the word ceases to mark the object, the emotive force disappears. If I say "dog!" to a child who is afraid of dogs, taking care to block out completely the denotative aim of the word (a closed and empty room), the child will not be afraid.

On the other hand, if the negative phase of poetic activity can be demonstrated in any little rhyme or jingle, the positive phase differs totally from this by occurring only occasionally. Divergence from the norm is the rule, and the reduction of this divergence is the exception. Poetry, be it good or bad, is total in any verse that I read, once I read it as a verse. "*Et la tigresse épouvantable d'Hyrkanie*" (Verlaine) is accepted as poetry from the simple fact that I place a stress at the hemistich, right in the middle of a word, throwing to the winds the rules governing the usage of the pause in practical language. A definition must contain the constant quality, and if it fails to do so it does not cover all that is to be defined.

Finally, the criteria of positivity, which the author invokes to distinguish the absurd from the poetic, forces him to stop the history of French poetry at the end of the nineteenth century, and even to exclude from that a whole section of Rimbaud's works. "*Nocturne vulgaire*," he tells us, is not a poem, since for this it would be necessary "for the meaning to be at once lost and found again in the reader's understanding."¹¹

Would it be enough voluntarily to break the code, for others to recognize in us the quality of a poet? No; we still must profess to be poets. J. Cohen can answer this argument by the present absurdity. If poetry were pure violation of the code, the concept of a poem which, by dint of infringement of the code, strictly conveyed no meaning at all, would not be contradictory; quite the contrary, it would realise the principle of poetry in all its purity. Now such a poem would no longer be language, but noise. But since literature is the art of language, it would not be able to recognize such a poem as one of its own. Therefore it would not be a poem. Whence we deduce that poetry is something apart from the violation of the code. The premises are false. A

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

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poem which conveys no sense takes away from the poet the very object of his appetite for violation. Where there is no longer any language, the poet no longer has anything to violate. The corrosion of language by poetry depends on the supposition that poetry is the vehicle of a minimum of sense. But this minimum can fall very low. However incoherent and obscure a text may be, the presence of some loaded words is enough to allow it to convey some sense. Whence the constant use made by happenings of a thermo-nuclear, erotic, or concentrational kind.

From what every poem transmits in the way of sense, however, we cannot deduce, with Cohen, the thesis according to which poetic activity consists in posing divergencies in order to resolve them, since happenings as well as many of Racine's texts abound in unresolved divergencies. The work, in fact, divides itself as follows: several words which are semantically heavily loaded keep the text within the limits of language (they communicate and represent something, even if they appear in a totally incoherent sentence). The being to be maltreated (language) is made incapable of dodging, and then one can attack it in the manner of such anti-social beings who hammer with their fists at the face of a victim immobilised with his back up against a wall and his arms outstretched.

The law-breaking essence of poetic endeavour is seen again in the analogies formed by human perception between Poet and King. "The Divine Right of Kings" on the one hand; on the other, "Poet by the Grace of God." Here the laurels bestowed by the Muse; there the triumphal garlands. Frances I said to Ronsard: "Both of us wear crowns; but I, the King, received it, and you, the Poet, award it." If the king is sacred (sacer, taboo, untouchable), it is because law-breaking is the essence of his labour and his life. It is impossible to govern without soiling one's hands. The society which gives itself a king is aware of this; it has given itself a person whom it authorises to sully himself in the interests of the public. The same goes for the poet.

Another manifestation of the legally felonious nature of poetry is the sanctification of the poet and of his language ("Muse" double meaning of the Latin "*vates*," which implies the god as well as the poet, etc.). Poetry is a variant of the sanctity of law-

breaking.¹² Here, the Son of Man is tortured, murdered, and consumed with general approbation (and this is Christianity); there, a specialist, adulated by the group, weakens the linguistic foundations of society (and that is poetry). Sanctity is present in both cases and for the same reasons.

III. POETRY AND FESTIVITY

However, a definition of poetry is not plausible, unless the most precise evidence is brought forward of the gain realised thanks to this loss. There is a kind of poetic enchantment; we must deal with this now.

Poetry is the codified breaking of a law which intoxicates us, and which imparts a value to the code which it violates. The sociologist has guessed at the consequences. *Festivity* is a codified transgression which intoxicates us, and which reinforces the authority of the laws which it breaks. This last proposition would have been more obvious a thousand years ago, and the ethnologists give it their assent more willingly than our contemporaries: The French festal days no longer have the same degree of lawlessness which explains the success of the Carnival at Köln or the Oktoberfest in Munich. Festivity is an allowed, even commanded excess, the solemn violation of a prohibition. Men do not commit excess because they are in a happy mood, under such a law; excess is part of the very nature of festivity.¹³

Let not the Christian festivals be brought up as an objection to this, as Chateaubriand did:¹⁴ their cycle sums up the life of Christ, and culminates in two supreme transgressions: deicide and theophagy, absolute form of cannibalism.

Links and analogies abound between poetry and festival.

Poetry puts the heart on holiday; the reader of a poem dresses his sensibilities in their Sunday best.

Poetry arises from a complex whole, whose basis is dancing,

¹² On this concept: Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, P.U.F., 1939, pp. 88-127.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Totem et tabou*, Paris 1924, quoted by R. Caillois, in *Le Mythe et l'homme*.

¹⁴ *Le Génie du Christianisme*, IV, I, VII, quoted by Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, under the article on *fête*.

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song and instrumental music. This compound is one of the major elements of primitive festival.

Poetry and festival both encourage crimes that are repressed during working days. Carnival demands adultery. The publisher of a scientific review refuses an article, saying "This is poetry—a bad example which we cannot give in our Review." The anti-social man is plague-stricken, but this pariah that is the poet gets national mourning. A rhyme or a piece of alliteration which slips into utilitarian prose provokes the sanction bestowed by ridicule.

Poetic language mobilises combinations that are highly improbable; the "blue azure" of Mallarmé's is a piece of information of exaggerated cost.¹⁵ The message transmitted does not justify such expenditure. Similarly, there is no festival without waste. A bath, or, better, a swimming-pool filled with Moët & Chandon, is enough to convince us that our contemporaries have not yet lost their sense of festival.

We have no other alternative but to conclude from these analogies that poetry is a form of festival. Since it sometimes serves in a festival, it cannot be a variant form. We hold rather that festival and poetry have the same function.

From Freud's time at the latest,¹⁶ we know that culture bullies nature, that society bruises instinct. The long process of socialisation which is the youth of man does not unfold without pain, and its results are always precarious. Instinct has not been suppressed but damned back, even compressed. The risk of explosion is permanent. Thus, just as some teachers encourage and even organise rowdyism so as to have quiet classes, so society consolidates itself by provoking and channeling the mutiny of our instincts, on a fixed date. Mutiny is more evident in festival than in poetry, but perhaps it is less radical. For the poet-insurrectionist attacks one of the most important foundations of social cohesion; in the course of a poem he subverts the institutions thanks to which the individuals communicate and co-operate, and so attacks society at a delicate point. This point moreover presents a maximum vulnerability. For if some inhibitions have an instinctive basis (like, for instance, the instinct not to kill with cold steel),

¹⁵ "Coût." The word is taken in the sense understood by information theory.

¹⁶ *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. In: *Abriss der Psychoanalyse*. *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Fischer-Bücherei, No. 47.

the prohibitions which guarantee the good working of the linguistic code are, on the other hand, such prohibitions as have only been learnt and are hence precarious. After all, the apprenticeship to language is a long one, and correspondingly traumatic. The child is clean before it can talk. We never finish learning how to speak. Because of all this, the linguistic code is a symbol which becomes the first choice on which the oppressed instinct cannot fail to satisfy its ill-temper. For instance:

Unlike her elder sister, L., two and a half, cannot bear to revolt against her parents. Depriving herself by these means of a natural and necessary enemy, she finds another in language, which she methodically attacks. So she takes it into her head to change all final "s" to "l": "*l'autobus*" becomes "*l'autobule*." When she is mimicked, she gives a sickly smile, and when she is taken up for it, she says "*l'autobus*" with docility. But one or two days after these attempts at correction, she begins stammering, but to such an extent that ill-will is obvious¹⁷ (twenty syllables of "pa" before she can say "papa is nice"). Her frightened parents give up correcting her "l" to "s." Two weeks later her stammering vanishes,—an abnormally brief period.¹⁸ But at the same time, lambdacism spreads,—now all the final consonants turn into "l"; the "*douche*" becomes "*doule*," and "*Gérard*" turns into "*Géral*." Then the middle consonants are affected: "*Lisette*" becomes "*Lillette*"; at the same time, her little face is wrenched into Breughelian grimaces. Yet when the child does not know that she is being watched, alone in her room, all doors closed, she carries on a conversation which is appreciably more correct and her face stays normal. The entire process took six weeks. The elder sister, who is more aggressive, has always had a more positive attitude to language, and her teacher at school praises her vocabulary. But the youngest of the family, not wanting to attack her mother, maltreats a substitute ("*Ersatzobjekt*"). Since she cannot make a poet of herself, she exposes herself to social sanction; we are however familiar with groups of adults where transgressions like "*nossette*" for "*sonnette*," "*ténègres*" for "*ténèbres*" are appreciat-

¹⁷ The analogy with Mallarmé's "*le bleu azur*" leaps to mind. The stammering of sense is called redundancy.

¹⁸ Dr. Benjamin Spock, *Comment soigner et éduquer son enfant*, Collection Marabout, Verviers, s.d., p. 325.

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ed. In each case, the violation brings such satisfaction to the sinner as does not differ from what the poet receives from the kisses of the Muse. The only difference lies in the attitude of the group. The laurels which the former decrees for the poet doubtless give him pleasure, but this pleasure is not particular to poetry.

The extreme nature of the pleasures bought by festival and by poetry are the result of the state of compression under which the instinct is bound, born down upon by the effect of social imperatives. Without repression, no paroxysm. Without Apollo, there can be no Dionysus. Paroxysm is a sudden expansion of the self, for nothing can explode but what has been compressed.

The satisfaction is even more exquisite, and finer-edged, when the transgressional act does not avenge any one particular instinct, but all repressed instincts. Thus festival and poetry, inasmuch as they abolish the rule of the Law, give satisfaction to the whole pulsing mass, since every driving force will sooner or later come under the restrictions of the Law.

IV. POETRY AND THE FLESH

Thus we see that poetry speaks to our biological self. Additional proof is the role it assigns to rhythm. It is through dancing that rhythm comes to the cultural world. But a dancing body only imitates its own heart.¹⁹ The cardiac pulse is the natural model for rhythm, and dancing is a pulse that is generalised over all the body. R. Caillois says: "The swarming mass of humanity undulates as it pounds the earth, and pivots in jerks around the central mast."²⁰ Everything is there, the circulating cycle, and the jolting progression. Could we speak of a blood plasma in transit in the vascular system? Hence we see why the rhythm of verse (of feet!), like the rhythm of footsteps, is suited to the celebration of the almightiness of instincts: the regular stimulus which provokes cardiac contraction and by which rhythm, whether metric or choreographic, is inspired, is the most patent example of an endog-

¹⁹ Similarly Brecht, *Das Tanzfest oder der Augenblick ewiger Verdammung*, Prosa I; Suhrkamp 1965: "They abandoned themselves to their limbs, and these danced." Classical dancing is clearly quite another matter, where the body mimes the spirit, solemnizes culture, and simulates weightlessness.

²⁰ *L'Homme et le sacré*, p. 90.

enous creation of stimuli.²¹ And instinct is nothing else; the differences that strike us obey the greater or lesser speed of the production of stimuli. Anger, sexuality, sleep, obey the same periodic rhythm. On the other hand, the movements which have little to do with instinct surprise us by their lack of rhythm, their fluid, flowing character. The gait of apes is the most typical example; in an area as heterogeneous as a virgin forest, the blind instinctive mechanisms which govern a horse's gallop, far from being useful, must be broken, and give place to behaviour that has been learnt, in which every movement obeys cortical regulation.²²

Thus it is not at all surprising that the disappearance of festivals in modern society has found a correspondent growth of dancing. At the same time, the rhythms have become more marked, percussion instruments break loose, the electrophones emphasise the bass instruments (and so the beat), and the steps of the dance reject all the compromise which it had undergone in spirit and in culture. The Jerk is a pure dance.

The proof we have just developed in order to bring to light the biological substratum of poetical endeavour and consummation draws its material from the arsenal of the means open to the poet. What we want to produce now is drawn from a description of the poetic effect.

Poetry *fascinates*. Now the scenes which fascinate most of all are those in which we are allowed to see the brute biological fact, the carefree life of the spirit, instinct trampling society, nature abolishing culture. For instance, murder in which the victim is punched to death, a dying man, a staggering drunkard, a man being sick.²³ To be sure, E. Otto has observed that the "*fascinosum*" attracts and repels,²⁴ but he has consequently underestimated polymorphism and the omnipresence of the biological and visceral fact. The latter can disguise itself in such camouflage that while its attraction remains, although somewhat subdued, its repellent

²¹ "*Innere Reizerzeugung*" in Lorenz.

²² Lorenz, II, p. 336.

²³ This variant of the "*fascinosum*" is especially notable in *The Tin Drum* of Günther Grass, where emetic situations abound. More generally, this vital force, which displays itself with a magnificently triumphant lack of shame, explains all the fascination exercised by the early works of Brecht (Prosa I, *op. cit.*, and, above all, *Baal*).

²⁴ *Le sacré*, Paris, Payot, 1949.

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effect disappears completely. Culture's participation in the poetic endeavour is so great that the reader can celebrate his instinct without even being aware of it, and consequently without being disgusted by it. Poetry makes amends to the beast in us under the aspect of angelicism.²⁵

This description of the pavilion under whose awning a poem can be consumed with neither remorse nor disgust can be extended to poetic creation. The more the poet wishes to subscribe to the anathema cast on nature by culture, the more intellectual his poetry becomes. But instinct will find its revenge in an obsession for rhythm. Valéry offers a typical example of this configuration. The idea of the body makes his gorge rise: "The domestic pig's bad reputation has doubtless fallen on him because he is flesh-coloured. For he is no more dirty and no more lustful than all things that live and breed."²⁶ But the first draft of the *Cimetière Marin*, which is a philosophical poem, is the rhythmic blueprint for decasyllabic verse, par excellence.²⁷

From this we may measure the services rendered by poetry to the smooth running of linguistic instruction. The infringements of the code allow the human animal periodically to satisfy its irritation at the oppression of the code, the symbol of all social constraint.²⁸ These widely-spaced uprisings guarantee long intervals of docility. By rhythm, on the other hand, poetry styles itself to our unconscious as the direct expression of bestiality: so language lends itself to visceral celebration, the conflict of nature v. culture is for a moment appeased, better still, the antagonists, in a sense, collaborate. Thus, thanks to the poet, the services rendered by language to the total man (the appeasement

²⁵ Was Valéry aware of the import of his discovery when he made the Pythia say, as it was disturbed by the uprush of hysteria: "*Honneur des hommes, saint langage*"?

²⁶ *Tel Quel*, Suite, Pléiade, II, 759.

²⁷ The second restitution of instinct in Valéry is the erotic humour of the meetings of daily life. The author of *Sur Phèdre Femme* slanders the flesh, but Valéry the worldly conversationalist is fond of blue jokes.

²⁸ The fact that the poets of the strict kind replace *the* code by another one makes no difference, since however strict they may be, poetic laws all aim at the organisation of the obscuration of the message. Moreover, the systematic and difficult nature of these infringements allows them to preserve the credibility of their illusion of angelicism.

of conflict), to his animal part, and to society, confer on it such a prestige that the grammatical and lexical code finally emerge reinforced and evaluated from the extravagances of a poem.

V. THE FATALITY OF SOME MISTAKES AND RESISTANT MOVEMENTS

Now we have at our disposal all the elements necessary for the explanation of so many of the resistant movements which our themes must necessarily encounter, and equally of the reasons for which J. Cohen masked with positivism the transgressional nature of poetic endeavour. Poetry cannot offer restitution to instinct, unless the subject is ignorant of the plot that is being hatched. Reparation may only be paid in innocence, consequently, in the subconscious. If I know that the *Cimetière Marin* intoxicates me because it cajoles the animal in me, the enchantment decreases or disappears, since the “*Monsieur*,”²⁹ that is to say, the guardian and attorney of cultural order, becomes aware that his vigilance has been found nodding; distracted with anger at the idea of being made to look a fool, he flogs the Man²⁹ with a shower of blows. He thinks he is playing the role of the angel, when he is playing the part of the beast! Felt consciously, poetic pleasure thinks itself culpable, and then the sense of purity, liberty, sanctification, all that makes up its value, disappears. It was not by mere chance that the poet and the lover of literature chose this legal offence, that is the pleasure of writing and reading poetry. Poetic pleasure is their resolution of the antagonism between nature and culture. Have they any other? There can be nothing less certain. We cannot understand why they should lend a hand to their own murder. And they too would be justified in reproaching us, scarcely modifying a line of Racine’s: “Why do you envy me the air I breathed?” The poetic endeavour can only be understood by an outsider, by a man who does not need to write or to read poetry to survive. We challenge the evidence of poets and their friends, since we cannot allow such partisan witnesses to speak.

Similarly, since the time that Charcot and Freud disclosed to a

²⁹ In Valéry’s sense.

large public the non-organic nature of hysteria³⁰ and especially the role of frustration in the release of the crisis, the hysterical arch and all the gestures of a sexual nature which accompany the attack have become scarce. The two doctors have done most ill service to suffering humanity, since, at the moment of the crisis, the patients were satisfied.³¹ There is nothing more moving than the description of the hall for hysterics in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*.³² We will retain from it, for our argument: "She (the visitor, Clarissa) had the impression that she was accompanied by a flock of marvellous love-birds, and that with them she would be able to rise higher than any of the paroxysms of life and of art would allow."³³

Now we can understand the discomfort provoked by poetry and modern literature since the time of Rimbaud in a number of cultivated and wellread people. As their law-breaking character becomes more and more marked, and culture and the code are ever more blatantly flouted, the myth of angelicism can no longer be maintained. Emil Staiger,³⁴ Etiemble, could not swallow poetry until the name of poetry had been refused to all but the literature of nonsense and sewers. J. Cohen's book is an admirable attempt at self-defence. The instinct of preservation inspires all these ingenious pages, so false and so subtle, that speak of the definitive positivism of poetic writing.

³⁰ Peter R. Hofstätter, *Psychologie*, Fischer-Bücherei, 1957, p. 216.

³¹ At the time that the hysteric could still consider herself as an irresponsible invalid, and could demand the indulgence that belongs to any victim of an organic deficiency, she enjoyed without remorse the satisfaction afforded by this sham love. If the illusion is destroyed, such scandalous conduct vanishes, to be sure, but frustration remains, and now it is totally unappeased. The progress of illumination thus risks provoking accidents comparable to those occasioned by aversion therapy against homosexuality: the patient returns to normality, but since access to the only formula for equilibrium known to him has been barred, he kills himself.

³² *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1952, p. 1438. (End of the third part, and fourth part of the posthumous notes, chapter 93, "Clarissa and Friedenthal.")

³³ Baudelaire saw the functional analogy existing between hysteria and poetry (see the articles on "hystérie" and "hystérique" in Paul Robert's *Dictionnaire*.)

³⁴ The backwash after a lecture. "The bourgeoisie of the German language and the indency of modern novels," *Le Monde*, 24th. May 1967, p. vii. Also: "Der Zürcher Literaturstreit," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 1967 April/June (22).

The historicity of poetry

On the other hand, we see what is the motive force behind the evolution of poetic language. If poetry is transgression, it is condemned to perpetual evolution. For, however little a legal mode of transgression becomes stable, it will assume an institutional character which becomes increasingly marked, and, in the same degree, its aptitude for transgression dwindles. Plagiarisers and even epigones are despised; they do not break enough laws. For the same reasons, religions are condemned to evolution, and, were it not for persecution, to droop and wilt away. If the chief enemy of protestant theology in the 20th century is the Emperor Constantine, this is certainly because he made Christianity official, and so neutralised its revolutionary character. Who still feels the punishable character of deicide? The antisemites. But they take no notice of religion, their indignation is a sham.

Most probably the interplay of genetic factors is added to this. We know that the cave bear, as soon as he became lord of creation, exhibited all the symptoms of autodomestication, and particularly a considerable enlargement of the band of genetic dispersal. Master of the world, he was less subject to the harsh laws of natural selection than his contemporaries, with the result that his kind lost by its uniformity.³⁵

The human race followed the same evolution, *a fortiori*. So “the great majesty of *Pax Romana*” and the free traffic of cereals in all the Mediterranean basin inevitably weakened the severity of natural selection and increased the heterogeneousness of genetic capital. A population that was henceforth a composite one had to take its place, for good or for ill, in cultural frameworks fashioned by and for a homogeneous population. There was a nightmarish discordancy for the people on the fringe, who became increasingly numerous. The epidemic of suicides (*libido moriendi*) and the distaste for life (*taedium vitae*) diagnosed by Seneca may be find some explanation here.³⁶ Similar was the drop in the birth-

³⁵ Lorenz, II, p. 240.

³⁶ We can thus measure the opportuneness of Christianity, which makes sense of the difficulty of being, by interpreting it as the expectation of the City of God. Far from this religion's propagating the distaste for life, it on the contrary re-

rate evident in the time of Ausonius (4th century A.D.), at both extreme bounds of the Empire and no longer only in Rome, as in the times of Augustus. Closer to us is the drop in the infant mortality-rate in France, preceding birth control and the rise in the number of suicides. If our hypothesis is a true one, even if social pressure has not increased, the individual endures it less, because he has become more highly individualised. The general trend of poetical linguistic evolution must therefore follow a course of increasing transgression, until a new cultural framework is created, which will cater for the new fact of genetic dispersal.

VI. POETRY AS ONE SOLUTION "AMONG OTHERS"

A provisional balance will lead us to a definition of the place of poetry within the human framework.

The conflict between nature and culture may either be stabilised by a compromise, or else turned to the advantage of one of the antagonists.

If a compromise is effected, it consists of a periodical transgression which is encouraged and organised by society, for instance: festivals, wars, strikes (the summer of 1936) the cinema,³⁷ mock combat, religion, poetry, scientific research.³⁸ This compromise is not only man's privilege. So the death's head monkeys in South America³⁹ indulge in a competitive sport shown to be a game by a special kind of whistling which forms an accompaniment to all the passes of the combat. When the whistling stops, the game becomes a free-for-all, and tackling and kicking are unrestrained. The sifaka monkeys in Madagascar, in their turn,

presents an effort to reabsorb it, to live with the minimum expense. The Nietzschean critiques takes the effect for the cause.

³⁷ 491, for instance, a film by the Swede Vilgot Sjoeman. On the strikes of 1936, there is the evidence of Simone Weil, in: Louis Bodin and Jean Touchard, *Front Populaire 1936*. Kiosque, A. Colin.

³⁸ Deep in the heart of every research-worker nestles the ambition to disprove the evidence of contemporary culture. The research-worker is the Don Juan of knowledge, but a Don Juan with a fat wage-packet.

³⁹ Vitus Droescher, "Stufenleiter der Intelligenz," *Die Zeit*, 1966, No. 50, p. 46. This is a résumé of Peter Winter, "Verständigung bei Totenkopfpaffen," *Umschau in Wissenschaft und Technik*. (Frankfurt a.M., 15. October 1966, pp. 653-58.)

organise warfare to such perfection as makes us blush for shame: any aggressor whom the adversary can reach in a leap from his position in the branches is counted dead, if he cannot leap as far. One would be tempted to call a war which is so like a game of chess a "game," if the object of the conflict, here as in many other wars, was not the fixing of a hunter's boundary. But bridge is also played for stakes. In reality, wars and games always aim at something else apart from stakes, with the result that their common boundary is a fluid one; the word "*Kriegspiel*" is a secondary proof. But we reestablish the unity of the phenomenon of "war," and emphasize its links with poetry when we state that the total war of Clausewitz is to the war waged by the sifaka monkeys what modern poetry is to the poetry of Boileau.

If the individual cannot find in his environment the matter needed for a compromise, there are two possible ways out, of which the extreme forms are crime and suicide.

Crime: The individual becomes asocial;⁴⁰ he can suffer the yoke of culture so ill that he is not content with liberating himself of it, and tries to subvert it; the life of the tramp or of the hippy, drugs, homosexuality, incest, hysteria, cynicism, coarseness, bad character, flight into the tropics, colonisation, Robinson Crusoeism, all are softer forms. These all represent something other than a simple abreaction of instincts repressed by culture: repression has aroused a surge of resentment and it is this that the crime (or its benignant forms) satisfies.

Suicide: the individual becomes neurotic. Culture keeps its pressure bearing down upon nature, but nature suffers a martyrdom. Wars (compromises) stimulate a drop in the suicide level. When the surrealist poet Rigau, some days before his suicide, shot at his companion-writers "You are all poets, and I—I am on the side of death," he defined a category of human beings who, as soon as they recognise the limitations of poetic compromise, have no other way out but self-destruction. Poetry stands

⁴⁰ Lorenz, II, 195. Since the oppression of culture is not the only cause of resentment the living being encounters on his way, it is obvious that asocial attitudes can arise from other sources than those described here. The mourning of the dog left at home by its master to the loving care of his family can turn him into a dirty vagabond and a chicken-chaser. In this case, his return to society coincides with his master's return. (Konrad Lorenz, *So kam der Mensch auf den Hund*, pp. 20-22).

between the law courts and the morgue, and the case of Mayakovsky is as significant as that of Genet.

VII. ALL IS NATURE

A science of poetry, that bases itself upon the concept of the antagonism between Nature and culture, owes it to itself propose an explanation of the genesis of this antagonism. It could not accept such an antagonism as insoluble without betraying the unifying aspirations which characterise scientific endeavour.

Having dismissed the naïve dogma of original sin, we find ourselves faced with the following difficulty: how are we to explain how nature should have produced culture, how to explain that one term should have created its opposite?

An intuition of Nietzsche's, linked with a hypothesis of Freud's, leads us to a solution. For Nietzsche, in fact, the progress of civilisation is driven by the motor of cruelty.⁴¹ Man would never have become what he has become, if he had not been animated by the wish for self-punishment, if he had not experienced the pleasure of making himself suffer. An instinctive theory of the cultural endeavor is here in germinal form. For if man is overwhelmed by various inflictions which he has imposed on himself, we must admit that he has, inside him, prefigured in his chromosomes, a thrust, a need, which drives him to be his own executioner, a need whose satisfaction is the source of pleasure. Under the unhappy and romantic name of the death-wish, Freud has admitted the existence of such an impulse, but, unlike Nietzsche, he did not observe what culture owes to it.

Konrad Lorenz was without a doubt one of the first to exploit the certificate of superiority which wins, for superior animals (the rat, the dolphin, the crow), before the tribunal of natural selection that innate mechanism which drives them to break the mechanism of old instinctive modes of conduct, and to build up in their place, for the sake of pleasure, a flexible and regulateable mode of conduct out of the links of the primitive chain. Having recognised the positive value of this innate mechanism as far as

⁴¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*. From, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Hanser Verlag, München, 1955, vol. II, pp. 693 ff.

regards natural selection, Lorenz reintegrated it at the same time with nature. Consequently there is no need to place the conflict between nature and culture, but to place it within nature itself. The animal is never so competitive as when he has an instinct which enters into conflict with all the other instincts, and which we can call the competitive instinct, curiosity, *libido sciendi*.

The young crow enjoys studying all objects that come his way, and putting them to a number of tests. For each object, he fixes a matrix which summarizes its positive and negative qualities. Now this matrix is not erected at the instigation of an immediate material need. Hunger is not the motor of his curiosity. If a bit of nut is left next to the young crow when he is immersed in his "research," he will ignore it. Similarly, the bird is at his most inquisitive and curious when he is fed entirely by his parents: when he is hungry, he follows his parents, giving them no peace, and returns to his research when he has been fed. Nevertheless, it is usually the instinct of intellectual appetite rather than moderate hunger that wins. The result of this disinterested research is that in case of scarcity the adult bird has a thousand strings to his bow; he goes straight to the place where he will find food to eat, however barren the region be. That is why the crow is as broadly spread over the earth as man. And like both of these, and for the same reasons, the rat too is cosmopolitan: any milieu suits him.⁴²

In the struggle for survival, the superiority conferred on rat and man by the marked development of this curiosity forbids our accepting the thesis put forward by Ludwig Klages,⁴³ according to which the spirit is antagonist to life *because* it represents a degenerate form of life. Certainly there is an antagonism, but it opposes ancient instincts, which are highly selective and specialized, to any newer and *more efficacious* instinct which is incited by the most diverse instincts, and which impels the animal to examine every object from the point of view of the satisfaction it will afford to the old instincts.

New and old instincts must of necessity enter into conflict. Among the most spectacular examples of this conflict, we recog-

⁴² Lorenz, II, 235-238, 335-339.

⁴³ *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 1929-1932.

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nise the monoideism of Bernard Palissy and Balthazar Claes.⁴⁴ But the young chimpanzee who forgets an other need for the pleasure of play is the battle field for the same conflict. It is not because competitive satisfaction is more attractive that the need of which hunger is the expression is suppressed. That continues, but is frustrated. *Libido sciendi* does not dissipate other appetites, it bullies them.

What is called the conflict of spirit against life is therefore no more than a particular case of the general conflict of instincts. The most elementary living being is provided with many behaviorist mechanisms, whose elements and sequence are inscribed in the genes equally with the structure of the organs. Hence, unavoidably, situations occur when two different mechanisms are called upon simultaneously. When the trainer brings his eye up to the crow's beak, the crow turns his head away with every sign of anguish. On the one hand, the stimulus "something round and shiny" impels the mechanism "peck," on the other, the correlation of trainer with parents inhibits with difficulty the release of this mechanism.⁴⁵

If culture is really the product of a new instinct, and so a particular occurrence in nature, the antagonism on which we have founded our allocution of the poetic fact within the human one needs to be reformulated. Our description of legal transgression ended by presenting this as a mutiny directed against society and encouraged by it. And, indeed, that is true enough. But if it is true that society polarises the individual's mutiny, it must also be added that this follows on the basis of a kind of externalisation. The former instincts ally against the new instinct (which bullies them for the good of the race),⁴⁶ affix to it the qualities of something evil, and project it onto their most startling and oppressive manifestation, which is culture. Now we can understand why such legal transgressions as war, poetry, festivals, are also insurrections against the intelligence. If the real enemy were so-

⁴⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *La recherche de l'absolu*.

⁴⁵ Lorenz, II, 151. On conflicting situations in dogs: Lorenz, *So kam der Mensch auf den Hund*, DTV, München, 1965, 88-92, 112-119.

⁴⁶ This last expression is metaphorical: what has been presupposed in our inquiry stays purely Darwinian.

ciety, we would not be able to explain the rebel's obstinacy in humiliating clear and distinct thought. The burning of the University Library in Algiers (600.000 volumes) was a festival to end all festivals.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This study enters its name in the movement for the rediscovery of the nature of humanity, established by Roger D. Masters in *Critique*, October 1967, pp. 857-876.

Similarly, when Tournier tells *Le Monde* (18.xi.67) that his novel is Rousseauian, hence visceral, blasphematory and antisocial, and that only the Rousseauists know how to celebrate the cult of the atomic bomb, he brings up before the conscience, consequently in an extreme form, a configuration in which we see the origin of all poetic creation.