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AESTHETICS AND HISTORY

Literature and art, which previously had been considered as cultural traditions, became, during the nineteenth century, objects of historical knowledge; the feeling of contemporaries was 'that history would be the hallmark of the nineteenth century, and would lend it its name, just as philosophy had given its name to the eighteenth'.[1] Of the many perspectives from which a work of art can be viewed, there was none more constant thereafter than that of history.

Since the time of Romanticism historical awareness is part of artistic creation itself; the artist conceives of art as a total order in which he has his place, and monuments of modern art arise under a firmament that seeks to embrace a universal past and present. Chateaubriand compares Homer to the Bible; Madame de Staël contrasts the literature of the north with that of the Midi; Lamartine and Hugo read Shakespeare, Byron, and the false Ossian; Sainte-Beuve writes *Tableau de la Poèsie française au 16ieme siècle*: from there to Baudelaire's discovery of Edgar Allen Poe;

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[1] Augustin Thierry, in 1834.

to Stefan George's discovery of Mallarmé; to Gide's discovery of Dostoevski; to Eliot's resuscitation of Gongora; to Breton listing his precursors in his *Manifest du Surréalisme*; (Swift is surrealist in his malice, Sade in his sadism, Hugo is surrealist when he is not stupid)—from Manet's discovery of the Japanese engravings his grocer used for wrapping-paper, to Picasso's exhumation of Negro masques: we witness a long parade of resurrections and discoveries which faithfully accompany modern art on its march toward an unknown masterpiece. But historical development of artistic awareness does not end here, in making literature and art an object of knowledge; the artist, who has always borrowed from other artists, now tends, if not to use them all, at least to seek them outside of a single tradition. Others have exacted from history a confirmation of their national independence: the feeling for primitive sources, for origins, is, in the nineteenth century, one of the literary expressions of the awakening of nationalities. Wackenroder's eulogy of Dürer becomes intermingled with a moving evocation of old Nuremberg: 'Blessed be your golden age, Nuremberg, the only period when Germany could boast of having its own national art . . .' Over and above this, curiosity about the Middle Ages is one answer French historians give to the German, who is never far removed from nationalism. The *chansons de geste* are a creation of eleventh-century France and not at all, as Uhland claims, of 'the German spirit in Roman guise' . . . History continues to nurture only the rhythms of life.

But, from *L'Histoire littéraire de la France* which the Benedictines of Saint Maur undertook in the eighteenth century, to *Manuel bibliographique de la littérature française*, curiosity and historical research in regard to literature tend more and more to assume the form of scientific knowledge. Art and literature become the subject of a science which, like all science, must consider its object as a thing to reconstruct in its entirety and to situate in the category to which it belongs, allowing for its relationship to our own subjectivity. We must determine the causes from which a masterpiece has sprung ('the supreme end is to find the point of impetus of forces in motion . . . Where is the original seed? How has it passed from potentiality to action?'[2]) to detect influences and sources, to establish what is the best text, to clarify, by studying variants, each particular method of creation, etc. Upon a gigantic collective pedestal the edifice of an historical science of literature never ceases to rise. Its imperatives are familiar: 'to outlaw sentimental qualities,' 'to understand clearly and not to judge'.[3]

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[2] Joseph Bédier.

So strong is the evidence that literature is mainly the object of an emotional experience and judgment that the masters of literary history have frequently admitted that their work was not exhaustive. Sainte-Beuve commented ironically on their first steps and their penchant for the 'unpublished document'. 'Notwithstanding this never ending supplementary research, let us preserve, if possible, the lightness of taste, the quick and delicate impression, in the presence of masterpieces alive with spirit, let us dare to have an opinion, clear and lively too, and quite definite, quite objective, sure of what it is without supporting evidence...'[4]

But Gustave Lanson, the master of literary history, is not loath to charge Sainte-Beuve, the master of taste and impression, with having spoken more of the men than of their works. 'Take his *causeries du Lundi* and see how rare are the essays dealing with great writers, and on the other hand, what spate of talk about all sorts of people whose common characteristic is that they wrote much or little but always as amateurs, never with the intention of creating a real literary work—women, judges, courtezans, generals, princes . . . And when, in his *Lundis* he does concentrate on a great writer, does he not carefully avoid a straightforward approach to the great works?' Yes, Sainte-Beuve does judge ('There is now more room than ever for opinions that emanate from genuine good taste'), but for him the value of a work is in its revealing spontaneity. 'I always try to judge writers by their innate power and by denuding them of whatever is superfluous or acquired.' To which Lanson replies that the value of a work resides in the work itself: 'He treated masterpieces of literature in the same way that he would consider the hastily written memoirs of a general or the epistolary effusions of a woman; he puts all these writings to the same use; they serve as a point of departure for reaching the soul or the spirit; this is precisely the way to eliminate literary quality.' Historians themselves agree that history is not enough, and reproach critics for being more history-minded than they are themselves . . .

History does not attempt to exclude or replace aesthetics . . . It merely encloses it in parentheses; one cannot do everything at once. There is a time to determine the sources of a work: a time to quench one's thirst in the work itself.

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[3] Gustave Lanson.

[4] *De la Tradition en Littérature*

Still, everything goes just as if history, far from evading and bequeathing to others the problem of value, denied the legitimacy of such a problem. Or better still, as if, in denying the problem, history thought it had provided a solution to it.

We are familiar with the savoury page in *Victor-Marie, comte Hugo* where Péguy accuses literary history of having obfuscated the living vision of a work:

> To look for information about a monument, a work, a text, for a text, for the meaning of a text, everywhere but in the text itself (and these are the same men who claim they invented the idea of relying upon the text, of *going to the text*), (you know, the famous *sources*), to seek light about a text, the meaning of a text, everywhere, as long as and only on the condition that it cannot be in the text itself . . .
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> They load their backs with the burden of all these ladders and micrometers and, leaving their house, moving out of their own home, without thought of return, they enter the house across the street, or as often as possible, a house much farther away, the farthest house, to see if there might not be, in this, the farthest house, some kind of a garret window, a hidden corner whence they might glimpse their house from this great distance (abandoned, to glimpse their *own* abandoned house), where one might, perhaps, by manipulating many instruments and then making many calculations, see, glimpse a little of what was happening at home . . .

'We must reread *Le Cid*,' Péguy concludes, 'or rather we must read it for the first time, and view ourselves afresh.'

Between history and aesthetics quite a conflict exists.

The history of German art—ever anxious for philosophical justification—has often linked the option upon which it is based with a rejection of aesthetics. Already Hegel opposed the historical succession of forms to an aesthetic of beauty, the representative value of works (their power to manifest a style) to their plain value . . .

For Worringer, if art is the object of history then it cannot be that of aesthetics. What is aesthetics? Nothing more than 'physchological interpretation of classical style'. Classical style is bound to the idea of beauty; but other styles are indifferent to beauty: no coherent ensemble of norms can extend its jurisdiction over the whole of art. Traditionally, aesthetics attempts to persuade us of the sovereignty of classical art (it alone would be art) by reducing the archaic to an awkward expression and the baroque to a decadent expression. (To the extent that Hegel sees Greek art as the pinnacle of which symbolic art and Romantic art are but the two supporting sides, he escapes history and remains in the field of aesthetics.) Had Gothic art aspired to beauty he would be justified in judging it as gross, barbaric, for it never achieved it. But it did not aim at beauty, and it accomplished what it attempted. To go back to Riegl's idea of a *Kunstwollen* contrasted with 'power', Worringer affirms that the history of art is not the history of the progress of a creative power, culminating in classical art, then degenerating into decadent or imitative forms, but rather the history of irreducible, incomparable intentions, formed by the artistic will. Every style stems from a particular intention. What we must do is to trace the course of that intention. Through Gothic art one must reach the Gothic soul: it is ridiculous to measure this art by the norms of formal art. Worringer hopes for a 'psychology of humanity', to be drawn from psychological interpretations of successive styles: the relationship he would hope to reveal is that which connects the intention of the artist with the expressive reality of a style, rather than the relationship of the formal structure of a work with its effect on us. It is not a matter of knowing whether the artist has been successful and how—that is the vain purpose of aesthetics—but rather what the artist wanted to do, with the understanding that any work is successful to the extent that it truly expresses the intention that governs it. 'A new historical science must have as its axiom that the artist knew how to do what he *wished* to do and that he did not know how to do what he never had any intention of doing.'[5]

The fallacy of aesthetics reposes, according to Worringer, upon the preconception of ineptness: according to Spengler, upon the prejudgment of civilisation.[6]

Just as the plurality of cultures banishes the concept of Civilisation, so the plurality of arts will exorcise aesthetics. In order to speak about aesthetics, all the arts, despite their differences, must be in agreement about something essential; on whatever level, there must be *one* system of aesthetics. However, styles, like cultures, are self-enclosed entities, lacking a common ground, lacking communication. The history of art? A succession of ruptures, of voices in disagreement, of untranslatable languages. If there is no language or thought capable of understanding, of comprehending as different aspects of the same human genius the fundamental notions of historical culture—the *atman*, the *tao*, the Faustian myth of the Occident—then there is no aesthetic sensitivity where a Greek statue, an Egyptian statue, oriental mosques and our easel paintings can meet. We neither understand nor like Egyptian or Chinese statues, we only think we like and understand them. For nothing is given twice, nothing is inherited: like our minds, art goes from the irreducible to the irreducible. Mycenae and Egypt never caused the eyelids of Dorian Greece to flutter, the Renaissance did not revive antiquity (the Renaissance was the transformation of Gothic to modern): nudes were contrasted with portrait painting, the Euclidian static to the Faustian soul, Pygmalion, in love with the statue he sculptured, to Siegfried, struggling to free Brunhilde from the marble . . . Where, then, do styles converge unless in the insignificant? For there are, obviously, common elements: 'elements of manual technique', 'logic of colours, lines, tone, of construction, of order'... These common elements are the smallest part of causality. The essence of art is on the side of Destiny: on the side of genius, of 'formal irreducible will'. 'Despite aesthetics', Spengler affirms, 'there is no atemporal, uniquely true method, but a *history of art* to which, as to every living thing, clings the mark of irreversibility'. He feels, just as Worringer does, that the essential task of the specialist is to connect style with intention: the last great work that the Occident must produce before it disappears is the 'morphology of the Historical Universe'. 'Psychologies of humanity', 'morphologies of culture': like Worringer, Spengler places a work on a level where the difference in quality is no longer of any moment. (The references, however, are illuminating: the great painters of the nineteenth century are not Courbet, Manet and Renoir, but Böcklin, Marées, Leibl, Menzel. And German nationalism merely serves to provide examples: had he been a Frenchman, Spengler surely would have opposed poor painters to the great ones, as long as they were representative.

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[5] *Gothic Art.*

[6] *The Decline of the West.*

But the history of art and of literature does not philosophise this way about itself; one scientific method among many, it is aware of *being only* history and would like to shelve the problem of value. Can it really do so? Whatever it does, this literature of which it is the history is the very same literature that is the object of value judgment; however prudent and modest it attempts to remain, history can hardly leave intact anything it has touched. What historian, having dedicated his life to scientific analysis, can escape the feeling that literature is essentially and even uniquely an historical object? Who would care to devote himself to a task that he deems secondary? We say that first one must understand clearly and then judge; one can easily end up by thinking that only understanding clearly matters. History, by its mere presence, perverts values, creates a precedent hostile to aesthetics.

To say that history perverts values is not enough: it does not recognise them. Historical analysis tends primarily to link a work with the causes that produced it: history sees literature as a unified and homogeneous whole wherein all works come together, as expressions of an era and as links in a vast causality. According to this point of view every work has the same value; literature, for the historian, is any literature. History, a powerful leveller, has multiplied during the last century its studies on writers about whom one can say no more than that they were writers. It investigates both Pradon and Racine, Thomas as well as Pierre Corneille, Népomucène Lemercier as well as Hugo: Gissing is as good a subject as Dickens, Nekrassov as Pushkin, Heinse as Hölderlin. Is the study of *Manon Lescaut* better than that of *Le Doyen de Killerine*, that of *L'Héritière de Birague* not as good as that of *Illusions perdues*? Whether we like it or not, great works are not left unsullied by the indiscriminate study of both great and minor works; this equality of treatment abases greatness more than it elevates mediocrity. An obscure resentment against greatness lurks beneath historical detachment and lends it strength. Strangely enough, history desperately tries to show on what loans originality subsides, whence the fresh waters that we drink from flow, what throngs surround the solitary genius, what similarities coincide with the exceptional. Shakespeare is just another Elizabethan dramatist, Calderon a dramatist of the Golden Age, Rembrandt a painter of the Dutch school who depicts in his own way Holland of the seventeenth century, just as Ter Borch depicted his century, Greco is an imitator of Tintoretto, Ronsard's poetry stems from Pindar's and from the anacreontic ode, Chateaubriand from Homer and Virgil, Hugo borrows from the Bible, Claudel from Aeschylus . . . If great works are not entirely reduced to their sources at least they are diminished by them; their privilege and their solitude are denied by demonstrating that they reflect their times like any other works, that they are subject, like everything else, to causality. The Republic of Equality replaces the Homeric Triumph.

The spirit of history is so much the spirit of analysis that the historian's secret desire is to spend all his days in an immense preliminary investigation, a preparation that would merely prepare other preparations. All too willingly the historian withdraws to his monographs, his detailed studies, his 'approaches'. Rare are those who realise that 'synthesis must enliven analysis'.[7]

Scruples? Indeed. But also complacency toward an activity that denies literature as a field where value is supreme.

Even though monographs on Rotrou and Pradon multiply, even though historians are content to point out what the great have borrowed from the obscure and to hint at their equality, no history will ever give Rotrou and Pradon the same importance as Corneille or Racine. To the extent that history results in a synthetic exposition, it has to find a hierarchy, an organisation, to decide which writers deserve capital letters and photographs. 'Monumental history' follows 'antiquarian history', to quote Nietzsche.

But the historian carries over into synthesis his distrust of value judgments. Let history itself (and not the historian) indicate 'great works'! History is God's judgment . . .

Therefore there cannot be such a thing as a history of contemporary art: time has not yet spoken. History, retracing the sources, knows the vanity of contemporary judgment. It knows, for instance, from Chateaubriand that the seventeenth century ignored its own literature. 'We see Rollin, a man of great taste and knowledge, weighing the merits of Fléchier and of Bossuet and making it quite clear that generally the former was preferred . . . Read what La Bruyère and Voltaire themselves have said of the literature of their period: is it possible that they speak of the days when Fénelon, Bossuet, Pascal, Boileau, Racine, Molière, La Fontaine, Jean-Jacques, Rousseau, Buffon and Montesquieu lived?' One cannot read without embarrassment, Jean Paulhan remarks, what Sainte-Beuve, Brunetière, Lemaître, Faguet, Anatole France wrote about Baudelaire, Stendhal and Mallarmé . . . This is because Rollin and the critics of the nineteenth century demanded enlightenment from falsely judged aesthetics, incapable of giving it: history alone provides enlightenment. In 1828, Emile Deschamps drew up the list of awards for the last few years. 'Monsieur Victor Hugo revealed his talent by the ode, Monsieur de Lamartine by the elegy, Monsieur Alfred de Musset by poetry.' Surprising insight! Is judgment really so impossible without the aid of history? But in 1829 the list of awards was reviewed and we read: 'We had not then received *Confidences* by Monsieur Jules Lefèvre, *Contes D'Espagne et d'Italie* by Monsieur Alfred de Musset, *Poèsies romaines* by Monsieur

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[7] René Bray.

Jules de Saint-Félix, *Iambes* by Auguste Barbier nor *Marie* by Monsieur Brizeux, nor *Dernières Paroles* by my brother Antony Deschamps . . .' Is it not apparent that literature in the making is unjudgeable? According to Thibaudet's advice, the historian should therefore ignore any literature 'which is not yet sorted out'. Or, if he does pore over it, he should only do so to classify, by generations, by categories, by motifs, subordinating and excluding nothing. He should cite all the names that are known to him, however short of space he might be. The same chapter ('Psychologists and Analysts') should include 26 lines on Marcel Proust and 30 on Henry Bordeaux, 8 on Louis Artus.[8]

Even Thibaudet, speaking in 1935 of *Tendances Actuelles de la Littérature française* includes André Malraux's novels and those of François Bonjean in the same paragraph entitled 'L'orient'.[9] There are many similar and amusing examples but it is useless to cite them. As we approach the contemporary period it is quite plain that histories of literature bear less and less resemblance to preceding periods and are more and more akin to telephone directories.

Historians readily admit the difficulty of the situation. But they say there is no way out.

The historian does not neglect the problem of hierarchy; he believes that to resolve it beyond any uncertainty of judgment is the very task of history.

But nothing is more ambiguous than this notion of historical importance whose objectivity is contrasted with the subjectivity of judgment. The historian believes that the significance of a work is assured by what it reveals about its era and by the role it played in it: 'representative' works are cherished by the historian because he finds in them less art than history and because the hierarchy of works thus seems to him to be completely unarbitrary, as assured as a well-documented chronology. But the criterion of what is representative often appears to be marginal: it defends a secondary value exposed to oblivion more than it establishes the real importance of the work. This the historian himself acknowledges. Although Benozzo Gozzoli is not a first-class painter, his 'Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem' depicts a court cavalcade and thus provides us with information about festivals in fifteenth-century Florence. Nor can we forget that *Astrée* or the letters of Guez de Balzac, Voiture's verse, Béranger's poems are precious evidence because they are more closely associated with their times than greater works . . . This partiality is stated prudently and leads to further partiality. But if the historian seeks less of literature and more of history in a work, why doesn't he go directly to history? The periodicals of the times are more instructive than Voiture's verse, a file of the *Constitutional* or the *Globe* is of greater interest than Béranger's songs; *La Mode* and *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* are more helpful in understanding French society under the Restoration than Balzac's novels. Works that are dominated by the spirit of the era reflect not so much its historical reality as its dreams. Novels of knighthood and *l'Astrée*, tearful comedies and sentimental novels, Parnay's elegies and the minor erotics of the eighteenth century, the 'black' novels and the *feuilletons* of the nineteenth are not at all 'representative' of history but rather of what a moment of history exacted of a masterpiece or an imaginative work. When he turns to these works for their historical truth, the historian is thwarted: the archives of the period are more helpful. Should he see these works for what they are—a moment of reverie and of aesthetic awareness—he must define the importance of a work by the very thing he was seeking to escape in history: its harmony with a transitory taste. Why is he wary of the taste of his day, entrusting evaluation to posterity, if a work merely has to suit the taste of a day to acquire historical importance? The historian's partiality for representative works results in a history that is falsely historical or in an aesthetics that is falsely aesthetic (the taste of the period, of course, is no criterion) and will not be worthy of its name.

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[8] Bédier-Hazard: *Littérature française*, II, 382.

[9] *Encyclopedie française.*

Is historicity inherent in a fact merely because it occurred in the past? Rather, is it not inherent in what somehow never ceases to occur? The present calls historical anything that has a place in the past. But only that which occurred in the past and still retains a meaning in the present is important. The historian honours not so much the 'representative' work as the 'masterpiece'; and, for history, what makes a masterpiece is its permanence.

What Goethe referred to as the 'productivity' of works frequently strikes the historian as the essence of their permanence. For an historian, dedicated to the search for causality, a work is sacred if it is a source, a stimulus for other works; hence the value of a work is confused with its material importance, which can be measured and appreciated without arbitrary judgment. Productivity is a *fact*. Restored to its true dimension —the future—the historicity of a fact can never be revealed at the very moment of its occurrence. The first Nazi putsch in Munich seemed an insignificant event; the 6th of February 1934 brought a new twist in French politics, and the symbol of the post-war world is no longer the palace of the United Nations in Geneva but rather the sealed car which carries Lenin to his destination in Petrograd. And no one yet knows whether the Russian revolution, like the Nazi revolution, was merely the beginning of an episode in the twentieth century, or whether, like the French revolution, the beginning of a world epoch. The same is true of works of art; we cannot judge contemporary art because we are not acquainted with posterity. Who could guess in 1857 the value of the 256 pages of Baudelaire that Poulet-Malassis published? When Hugo speaks of a 'fresh thrill', it is merely a polite formula: and no one can blame the critics of those days for not having seen what was not then visible. Baudelaire's worth is nothing more than his importance, his importance nothing more than his influence; a history of French literature gives him much space because the sonnet in *Correspondence* contains symbolism, *Tableaux parisiens*, realism, because Moréas salutes him as 'the true precursor' and Rimbaud as 'a true god'.

Nerval is singled out and separated from the minor Romantics with whom he had been confused because his *Chimères* contains symbolism and surrealism: Gautier is dropped—he leads to the Parnassians who lead to nothing. The Roman school interests only a few curious people on the periphery of literature because the trail blazed by Moréas has been abandoned. Ponsard and Scribe are triumphant the year that *Les Burgraves* appears. We may as well forget them: for where is the posterity of *Lucrèce*? *Les Trophées* led nowhere: *Une Saison en Enfer* led to half a century of poetry. *Les Chants de Maldoror*—surrealism. The greatness of Manet, of Cézanne and Goya can be ascribed to a new pictorial era for which they laid down the law.

Indeed . . . But the criterion of productivity, if it allows the historian to contrast a judgment of fact with one of value, is illusory. For, any value judgment is subjective.

In a page of his *Journal*, André Gide questions the perspectives we are here concerned with. In speaking of Boylesve, he likens his writings to a lesser Balzac and adds:

> In a general way it is interesting to note that the lineage of great men is always doubtful and in a sense, *oblique*, that it is never the accomplished masterpiece, or rather the most accomplished aspect of each work which the disciple will imitate or take inspiration from, but on the contrary, its defects; just as, in nature, parasitic proliferation develops on the shady

> side, not in the sun. In every work of art, its defects, its weaknesses are preferred to its perfections; the disciple seizes upon the imperfect because that aspect is the only one he can hope to develop . . . In just such a way Baudelaire's disciples borrowed from *Fleurs du Mal* the macabre, the strange (see Rollinat), never that perfection which is priceless. The same is true of Michelangelo, etc. It is rare that an artist, however great, develops to perfection every part of his talent; and when that does happen (Goethe, Racine, Poussin), one can truly say that there are no followers because all the roads are closed.

Is not Gide right? It would certainly seem that only the most superficial aspect of a work is influential. Imitation implies the imitable and the imitable is incompatible with genuine quality. To the historical criterion of productivity, is it not fitting to contrast the anti-historical aesthetics of the inimitable? Imitation, the salvation of schools, is the scourge of art, Hugo said. Is not beauty sterile: . . . 'if beauty were not death'? The great Shakespeare is he who has no followers, not he who influences Romantic drama; the great Hugo is not he whom we find reflected in Sully Prudhomme, but the man we find only within himself; what does Rollinat add to Baudelaire, Pradon, Lemercier, and Ponsard to Racine? The more a work is inimitable (unproductive) the greater it is. *Les Pauvres Gens* inspired more plagiarists than *Le Satyre*; the style of *La Nouvelle Héloise* was more popular than that of *Rêveries*; the tone of *Martyrs* more engaging than the tone of *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*. The posterity of *Resurrection* is more visible than is the future of *War and Peace*; Maupassant exerts more influence than Balzac; Cocteau more than Saint-Jean Perse. Turner and Constable are much more 'productive' in this sense than Vermeer or Watteau; Monet more than Renoir. Neither Ingres nor Delacroix nor Géricault had followers. What does Signac add to Seurat, or Cros to Signac? Although Sérusier may have stimulated Gauguin he is nonetheless a mediocre painter. Rouault's solitude does not diminish his genius any more than a crowd of disciples adds to Picasso's (on the contrary, this crowd shows up his vulnerable side). Although Barbès influenced Montherland he is not as great a writer as Proust, who has no disciples. The fact that Moréas hails Baudelaire as 'the true precursor' does not account for Baudelaire's genius—and Poe remains a rather limited poet in spite of the fact that Baudelaire and Mallarmé attributed to him part of their own inspiration.

Genius can exist without disciples, and mediocrity can have its own posterity. But to the idea of influence Gide's text gives a too precise meaning. 'Productivity' is not the stimulation of disciples but the shaping of the literature of the future. The productive writer is not he who lends himself to imitation but rather the one who opens the floodgates, who helps the future to take form. Rimbaud's fecundity is not to be found in his imitators who, for the last fifty years, have been feeding the esoteric 'avant-garde' journals. Is it to be found in Claudel? Less than in the new horizons he illuminated. Baudelaire's fertility is not in his style but in his revolution: the fact that after *Les Fleurs du Mal* nothing of any importance in European poetry was written the way it had been written before. Hugo's posterity may happen to call itself Eugène Manuel or Sully Prudhomme; Mallarmé's, René Ghil; Joyce's, Samuel Beckett: their real heritage is the doors they close upon the past, those they open, tentatively, upon the future. It is true that, far from adding to the lustre of Apollinaire, his disciples cast discredit upon him; yet his greatness is inseparable from the rustling murmur of his sources. He was right to state proudly: 'I sow my songs like grain.' Great works transform the society they spring from like the strange dawn of a new day.

But one can recognise that such fertility is the property only of great works without regarding it as a criterion that is material, that renders unnecessary the perspective of opinion. Despite history, productivity is not an isolated fact that is imposed upon us as the object of an experience—like a thing, an event. Doubtless the influence of works upon each other is a material fact that historical knowledge can investigate without departing from its objectivity: but then the productive writer becomes he, whoever he might be, who has imitators and disciples, whoever they might be. Marmontel as well as Laclos, Paul de Kock as well as Balzac, Ponson du Terrail as well as Dostoevski. Is it true that *Les Trophées* exerted no influence, whereas *Une Saison en Enfer* did? Actually, *Une Saison en Enfer* did not have the same influence as *Les Trophées*, did not influence *the same literature*. The Romanticism of Moréas did exert influence, but upon Maurras, and Pierre Camo Apollinaire influenced Max Jacob and surrealism. The influence which we feel justified in remembering is not simply a material event: it appears solely at the level of opinion; it is by virtue of a certain definition that the importance of literature, seen in terms of its calibre and its future, is assured. There is one kind of fertility which we retain as a value; another which we neglect because it is solely an influence. It is clear that productivity is not a fact but a judgment.

Granted that it is a system of aesthetics—a conclusion based upon taste—

is the theory of productivity decisive? Hardly. True fertility is a property only of great works; but there are great works that lack fertility. Shall we contrast works that go against the current to those that are carried along by the over-all movement of literature? Decidedly not. A literature is at every moment what it is capable of being; conformity to the tendencies of a period of art is not an act of accommodation but the very form of life itself. (It is true that the Romantic work should be 'as romantic as possible', etc.) But if reactionary movements are always derisory there is such a thing as the solitude of genius. The greatness of a work is not always dependent upon its agreement with the values of a period, not even with those of the future. *Les Fleurs du Mal* influenced modern poetry infinitely more than *Les Contemplations*; is it obvious that Baudelaire is a greater poet than Victor Hugo? The influence of Claudel is zero in comparison with that of Cendrars or Reverdy: no matter how much one might like the latter, how can one not discern in the former a greater poet? Giono exercises no influence and never will; he is today one of our greatest writers. There are works that are more important than gifted, and the gifted work can have no importance other than its genius. It is true that in periods when literature breaks with its past and seeks new directions, genius and the ability to direct coincide. After 1860, the great names of literature are the 'influencers': Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Laforgue, Lautréamont, Apollinaire, Stefan George, Eliot, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner . . . (But Verlaine? But Proust?) The situation is no longer the same when literature, imprisoned within a framework of expression, seeks perfection, not surprise, completeness, not novelty. Whoever carries a tradition to its peak leaves a great work behind him rather than a posterity: something is ended after Poussin as after Racine. Still others achieve completeness as they initiate, close avenues as they open them. Mallarmé, Joyce, Picasso push the forms they originate to the limit, burn their bridges behind them: there is the reverberation of a slammed door in their works, whereas you perceive the sound of a door swinging in the winds of the future in the works of Henry James, Baudelaire, and Cézanne. The classical work, the culmination of a tradition long and patiently ripened, resembles the 'landmark-work' which seeks to confine literature within its own bounds; neither has any future. The fertility of a work implies the meeting of a certain state of bewilderment in literature with an internal richness marked by some imperfection: it must open up new horizons and it must not shut them again completely, it must direct and at the same time give latitude. . .

Sometimes genius inspires, sometimes it discourages. Confined to its framework, the quality of a work is more important than its influence. The 'vertical' values of quality must not be sacrificed to 'horizontal' values of historical productivity.

History willingly admits that the value of a work can be other than its influence on other works: in its lasting presence, its historical survival—its permanence. But this permanence, according to the historian, is not the fruit of some uncertain appraisal: he conceives of it as a tangible reality, unquestionable, as a *thing* weighting our judgment. The contrast between permanence and appraisal is, for the historian, fundamental; in the name of the same principle, he designates the permanence of a work as evidence of its value and refuses judgment the right to venture a pronouncement on any art in the making.

It is clear that such a viewpoint is untenable: it is a fallacy of objectivity. What is this historicity that would ascribe a kind of material weight to value, that would transform it into a coagulation of sorts that once formed could never be dissolved? What is this mass that time collects and that nothing can ever again change? It is not history that creates judgment: it is judgment that makes history.

What is this criterion of historical permanence? Simply that of a universal consent maintained throughout time. The excellence of Homer is based 'upon the consent of several centuries'. 'I say the approval of several centuries, for it is time and the general assent of men that hallows our productions.' But La Motte replies triumphantly to Madame Dacier: 'Let someone tell us exactly how many centuries are required to deprive men of the freedom to appraise a work of the mind... We can have an opinion about works of the mind of every period.' Despite the many centuries that glorify Homer, he is no longer quite the same since Chateaubriand preferred the Bible to him . . .

What the historian assumes to be a factual reality, independent of our opinion, origin of our judgment (and which he translates into terms that incline us to contrast the objectivity of a thing with the inconsistency of an evaluation: importance, representative value, productivity, permanence . . .) are nothing more than a matter of opinion. At the source of historicity there are free, keen decisions based on aesthetic awareness; and historicity cannot last unless such decisions are constantly reviewed. As productivity is not a mechanical causality, a succession of occurrences, so the permanence of a work is not an objective presence imposing itself throughout the ages like the view of the stars in the sky. No historical reality can free us from the obligation and the risk of judging.

Doubtless aesthetic decisions belong properly in the realm of history. Since history embraces everything—even our thoughts of eternity—it is certain of never being defeated: this debate may seem pointless. But if history is limitless, it does have a definite character: it embraces everything, but it is important to know if, among the things it includes, there might not be the forces that create it. 'Men make their own history, but they do not do so freely.' Therein resides the whole problem. Rather we should say that man's freedom is historical, but it is freedom that makes for historicity: aesthetic judgments are part of history: but they are a part of history only because they make it.

The historian dreams of history as something exterior to human liberty, created slowly outside it and determining it: then history is but the material weight of the past upon the present. A great work seems to resemble an indestructible mass, advancing toward us from the end of time and formed by all that it trailed as it journeyed through the centuries. But the value of a work is not the mould that it gathers, the mass of which it is the nucleus, the solidification that permanence lends it: it is the relationship between its framework and a judgment. The dialogue between work and aesthetic awareness is history. But it constitutes history, it is not submissive to it.

History in which works of art are situated is the opposite of the history of historians. It is the very life of a free aesthetic spirit, and not at all the material weight of a past wherein one would see a reality that transcends judgment. The history of art is created by the opinion of critics, even though they may be contemporaries of the artist; and their opinion must be constantly reviewed—the interplay of revivals and eclipses, of lights and shadows that life, at every step, casts upon the past.

If judgment after the fact is possible, why consider contemporaneous judgment impossible? Either judgment is impossible, and the authority of a work is a material reality that takes shape with the passage of time: but we have seen that this authority is only a judgment; or all authority, all value is a judgment—and one can judge then and there if one can judge from a distance. From 1857 to 1952 *Les Fleurs du Mal* remained *Les Fleurs du Mal*: it was Baudelaire's posterity and 'fertility' that grew. But to acknowledge Baudelaire's greatness is not the same thing as proving his fame. It is true that our perspective is no longer the same: in 1857 no one could read *Les Fleurs du Mal* as one would read it today, but the meaning that Sainte-Beuve found in it was neither the only possible nor real one (if we suppose that the 'fresh thrill' that Hugo wrote about was a polite formula, it was an oddly exact one). Balzac did not react to *La Chartreuse de Parme* as we would: nevertheless he considered it a masterpiece. Nietzsche in the presence of Dostoevski, Taine in the presence of Nietzsche did not await historical consecration. Gide erred about Proust (did he really?), but Jacques Rivière did not: and Gide made no such mistake about Conrad or Henri Michaux. When Cézanne or Renoir painted their first canvases, neither Albert Wolff nor Camille Mauclair saw them; yet they were on display because, before they were welcomed to the Louvre, Félis Fénéon and Ambroise Vollard recognised their worth. In the presence of modern art Bonnat is blind in Paris just as Werner is in Berlin: but Hugo von Tschudi in Berlin, Gustave Caillebotte in France did not wait for history in deciding about what paintings to collect. He who refuses to voice an opinion at the time in order to await history's verdict does not discredit judgment: he merely disqualifies his own judgment and delegates his power to judge to others, more subtle and competent. When Anatole France, after having laughed a lot at Mallarmé, realised his error—even exaggerated it—('My mistake was to try to understand, one must also feel'), he believed, perhaps, that he bowed to the verdict of history: he vindicated those who admired Mallarmé in 1870. When a critic of the day, having ignored surrealism or repeated Clément Vautel's platitudes about it, seriously analysed it, he excused himself by saying that he waited for history to decide; actually, he merely waited for others to judge for him, and proceeded to repeat their remarks (neither Edmond Jaloux nor Jean Paulhan nor Marcel Arland nor Albert Béguin nor Marcel Raymond waited until surrealism became a part of history). The fact that nobody any longer is in doubt about Claudel (except stubborn Monsieur Benda) probably signifies that he is a member of the Académie Française: but the reviews that published his writings in 1895 did not await this honour; and when Jean Paulhan published the first writings of Henri Michaux, he did not wait for others to decide that this writer's fame was sufficiently established to do something about it.

It is possible to judge immediately, to recognise instantly not the full value of a work perhaps (it becomes enriched, changes, grows, in time), but that a work has value. Is the number of masterpieces originally unrecognised much greater than that of those whose merit was instantly acknowledged? I doubt it. Neither *Le Cid* nor *Bérénice* nor *Candide* nor *L'Esprit des Lois*, nor *Les Méditations* nor *Les Voix intérieurs* were ignored—

nor *Le Père Goriot* nor *La Recherche du Temps perdu.* . . . It is doubtless difficult to judge at the moment because one is alone, or almost alone: but even the fact that one's own judgment must be added to that of others does not mean that it is impossible to judge. Also, pressed by the need to come to a decision, aesthetic awareness is less lucid and free than it would be in the presence of a celebrated work: one can see better, one can see more in a work that is already classified. (Let us concede to Alain that museum paintings can be better viewed than those in a living room: not that one cannot judge those in a living room.) Moreover, contemporaneous appraisal creates a particular kind of difficulty. Often, passionately attached to the present, it runs the risk of eulogising secondary qualities, momentary trends. (Julien Grecq disapproved severely of the excessive amount of contemporary criticism.) The first readings of *L'Astrée* and *La Nouvelle Héloise* were certainly given excessive importance: today many writers feel that nothing existed before surrealism, that there is nothing of importance save their own writings in *Les Temps modernes,* etc. Conversely, contemporaneous appraisal sometimes tends to depreciate the contemporary simply because it is contemporary: subservience to ancient forms, fear of taking chances, combine, as in Sainte-Beuve, to create an invincible repugnance to genius.[10] Spontaneous judgments are difficult but we are making them all the time.

No work is mute before history gives it voice, even though the voice is not the one we hear at first. No work is sacred, even after history has given it form. History no more determines our judgment than it creates it. It is always in the present that a work is recognised. Is it its permanence that we admire in the masterpiece? Or is it its calibre? We may doubt that it is a masterpiece: history, which operates in such a way that a work cannot be forgotten, cannot prevent it from being cast aside some day. The fact that Voiture and Béranger were considered great poets in their day, that Parnay had more imitators than Racine, does not carry much weight when we read their works: Homer has lasted for centuries, but one may still prefer a fragment of Heraclites to the *Iliad*. Judgment gives us all our fearlessness of the past, since a work never revealed more than its dialogue with a living aesthetic consciousness which no history can force us to relinguish.

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[10] 'If Euripedes and Sophocles, if Virgil and the divine Homer himself were to return to the world, perhaps not imbued with the spirit of their times, because it might not suffice for us, but with the same ability they had, with precisely the same mentality that would absorb the ideas of our period; if, without telling us who they had been, they became our contemporaries, in the hope of delighting and enchanting us once again by devoting themselves to the same kind of work they had done before, they would be quite stunned to discover that they would have to bow down before themselves; that they could not compete with themselves, no matter to what sublime heights their spirits might soar; stunned to find themselves Moderns, apparently good or even excellent ones, but nonetheless mediocre poets, compared to Sophocles, to Euripedes, to Virgil and to the Homer of ancient times...' Marivaux, 1755.

The future may vindicate us for the freedom with which we attack the past. Indeed. Man can undo what he has done. The pedestal upon which we place our statues is made of a marble that posterity can destroy: it is not the rock of a history more powerful than man, but the clay of our cumulative admiration. Hardly has man freed himself from the authority of tradition than he finds that the values he opposed to it are threatened: to envisage history not as a lasting legacy, constantly enriched, but as the ceaseless metamorphosis of what has been by what is becoming, quickly dampens our initial exaltation.[11] And so we resolve to write for and in the present and to love it: 'We write for our contemporaries, we do not want to look at our world with the eyes of the future . . . but with the eyes of our flesh, with our own perishable eyes. We do not hope to win our case and we have no need of a posthumous vindication: it is here and during our lifetime that cases are won and lost.'[12] The work of 'writing for one's epoch', however, is not accomplished without some sacrifice or bitterness. And yet the threat is not indifference. Even if the future does not love what we love, still we have loved. History's subjection to the ceaseless problem of aesthetic opinion frees us from the past far more than it paralyses us in facing the future. We must feel, we do feel our present as the future of the past, not as the past of the future. The corrections that we impose upon the past should warn us to be prudent: we know that neither Voiture nor Béranger are great poets; we should be wary of discovering other Voitures, other Bérangers. Criticism, Baudelaire says, must be 'partial, passionate, shrewd', and he adds: 'written from a selective point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.' The mistakes and the pettiness of the past should lead us to consider a work with greater patience and care. But these metamorphoses cannot weaken a work we are sure we love. Because we know that change is inevitable, and also that it is limited. Great works alter, enlighten or grow dim: they are never completely extinguished. From the beginning of time the most distant gods still shine. Our period, which is capable of uniting, by its admiration, the most dissimilar works, knows that all genuine quality preserves a language, even if not, perhaps, its own. As long as men search in art itself, we are sure of not having loved in vain. If our values should disappear one day then all culture that recognises the worth of art as art would disappear. It is not another culture that threatens us, but a barbarism—a religion . . . it does not matter. If the images we love must die, whatever happens, they will not die so far as we are concerned.

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[11] 'Historical science does not develop, like the science of nature, according to a rhythm of growth and progress . . . [but] each society rewrites its own history because it selects itself, recreates its own past.' What is valid for history as knowledge is valid for history as an occurrence, for 'Man is not only in history but he carries with him the history he investigates.' (Raymond Aron: *Introduction à la Philosophie de l'Histoire*, pp. 10–11).

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre.

The bonds of history and aesthetic experience are too fundamental to be neglected. Historical knowledge, in its usual form, is indispensable to the understanding of a work. There is no question of minimising its contribution. Does history intervene equally in evaluation? Aesthetic judgment is a cultural, not a natural one, we have said; it comprehends works against the background of time and with reference to a motive of the period: it contrasts one work with another. But the history of aesthetic experience is not the history of historians. It is not a matter of placing a work precisely within a complete chronology, of situating it in a chain of influences and reactions, etc. For we know well enough that the soundness of aesthetic feeling cannot be measured by a culture thus defined. Those who have read the thousands of unknown novels of the eighteenth century are not necessarily those who best understand *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* or *Le Neveu de Rameau*; those who have read, besides the novels of Balzac's, all the novels he himself had read and all those he influenced are not necessarily the best readers of *La Comédie Humaine*. The history that intervenes in aesthetic evaluation is to historical knowledge what Plutarch is to Greco-Roman antiquity, what the *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* is to the life of Chateaubriand, what the legendary list of Napoleonic victories is to the daily life of the sick little man who never rid himself of his Corsican accent. Confronted with a work, we need not rely upon the shelves of the Bibliothèque Nationale: we can rely on the Pléiades.

Feeling for the greatness of a work is never a feeling for its historical reality: always for its relationship to a living consciousness. The work exists not in history, but in our reading of it. Certainly, Corneille exists in Corneille, Balzac in Balzac. But their greatness does not reside in their historical importance. It lies in the acclaim that greets the first performances of *Le Cid* and which Corneille contrasts to the reactions of the Académie, just as we find it later in the tears that the young Racine causes us to shed;

we find the same greatness when we read Péguy. Just as the greatness of Balzac, seen through the eyes of the young bakery girl to whom he handed a copy of Cooper which he was carrying under his arm, in exchange for her cakes, can be perceived by reading Baudelaire, Hofmannsthal, Proust, Curtius, Alain . . . The historian believes that art is judged by history and that nothing remains but to give an account of this thing, judged outside of ourselves. But historical consecration cannot exist without a living relationship with the work and its *uncertainty*. The real problem in regard to a work is not to ratify the judgment of facts, to analyse the object of this judgment as a thing, but to clarify the relationship that unites us to it, uncertain and troubled because it is a living relationship... The true problem is an aesthetic, not an historical one.

If judgments make history, they do so accidentally. In discovering the existence and the necessity of judgment, we find we must ponder it. Only by doing so can we elude the snares of history.