

“MODERNITY”  
AND THE EVOLUTION  
OF LITERARY CONSCIOUSNESS

The difficulties inherent to any analysis of the concept of “modernity” have been frequently emphasised: irregular and approximative semantics, pushed to the limit of totally meaningless, and harmless convention; constant tautology and instability; a whole succession of oppositions, followed by inevitable shifts of meaning and terminological errors; in a word, an endemic and periodically verified crisis. For all these reasons, “modernity” defines (this, however, is only a manner of speaking) one of the most paradoxical of literary ideas: the more widespread it becomes, the more it lacks clarity, the more it grows blurred. And yet—for the paradox to be complete—the phenomenon is clearly inevitable: in one form or another modernity emerges with every important mutation or revolution of literary thinking. Either partially or totally, and also within the framework of new theoretical syntheses, it accompanies or redefines *all* the decisive stages of European aesthetics. As a real framework concept, “modernity” tends to associate, crystalise or reformulate—with regard to “what is new”—all the essential transformations of literary consciousness. It embraces the com-

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

plete cycle of the ideal moments of creation and, implicitly, of literature: from the negation of old-style creation, codified and dogma-ridden, to the affirmation of new-style creation, made liberal, and freed from all aesthetic constraint. Modernity breaks a tradition, it disputes the conservative order of art and literature, with a view to instituting and installing its own tradition—this is a cyclical situation, which has perhaps been inadequately discussed. In a similar light, modernity is devoid of all precise chronological determination and becomes a constant which, in the various historical phases and on different semantic levels, expresses the inner movement of literature. This immanent dialectic of the history of literary thought goes through certain essential moments: one day, perhaps, there will come a time when the task of putting these moments in a pattern will be assured of scoring a success.

It would seem evident that the kernel of the concept of modernity—and this kernel at once constitutes its theoretical, traditional, elementary and prehistoric form—results from the old idea of novelty. Modernity is inevitably new, and novelty is always *ipso facto* modern. This is a vicious, tautological circle, and yet it is perfectly and disarmingly objective: without this motive force, modernity would not exist. But it is precisely this idea of force, which is latent but permanent and highly effective, which gives a true and tangible dimension to the concept of modernity—at once infra-historic and transhistoric. The concept, such as it stands, dates back way before the famous *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*: Antiquity was well acquainted with it; the Middle Ages cultivated a *dolce stil nuovo*; authors of *chansons de geste* addressed themselves to the lord of the manor with the words “Pray listen, my lords, to a new song” (*Oyez seigneurs, chanson nouvelle*); and classicism was aware of and recognised—thanks to La Bruyère (*Des Jugements*, 107) and others—the reality of new artistic creations. It was this aspiration towards what was new which caused La Fontaine to remark: “Il me faut du nouveau, n’en fut-il pas au monde”.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon is remarkable, because the classical spirit is in no way allied with modernism; novelty plays absolutely no vital

<sup>1</sup> J. de La Fontaine, *Climène, comédie* (*Œuvres diverses*, Paris, 1750, III, p. 167).

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role in its code of aesthetics. The case of the Baroque is diametrically opposed to this. It is based essentially on the concept of surprise and astonishment (*il meraviglioso*), within the framework of which novelty becomes a programmed business: an accurate consciousness of the differentiated attitudes of their precursors, of unpublished and original realisations, aimed in new and still unexplored directions, which caused Théophile de Viau to remark proudly: “...The manner of my new writing differs from the work of the most celebrated minds.” G. B. Marino declares that he is following a “new path” (*un nuovo camino*). L. Muratori attributes to poetic fantasy the property of “embracing works with a new form” (*di vestire con abito nuovo*).<sup>2</sup> All the partisans of modernity throughout the 17th and 18th centuries openly embrace this theory of novelty—synonymous from then on with modern style and modernity—in all its essential implications: the most synchronised expression possible of social realities, moral realities and contemporary intellectual realities, actual, immediate realities translated by successive definitions, whose rhythm and speed of adoption constantly increase with time. From synchronisation to anticipation, and implicitly to the avant-garde: these are the phases of modern radicalism, of the progression of the concepts of modern style, modernism and modernity. To quote an initiator of the modern consciousness of the 19th century, Baudelaire sums up the two attitudes: on the one hand he recognises that: “As every century and every people has had its beauty, we cannot fail to have our own too” (*Puisque tous les siècles et tous les peuples ont eu leur beauté, nous avons inévitablement la nôtre*), “we are in possession of a special beauty inherent in new passions” (*nous possédons une beauté particulière inhérente à des passions nouvelles*). On the other hand, he conceives and transforms “the heroism of modern life” (*l’héroïsme de la vie moderne*) into an absolute aspiration with definite limits: “To the end of the Unknown to find something new”<sup>3</sup> (*Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau*). Modernity thus becomes

<sup>2</sup> Théophile de Viau, *Œuvres poétiques* (Paris, 1926), p. 73; G. B. Marino, *Poesie* (Bari, 1913), p. 141; Lodovico Antonio Muratori, *Della perfetta poesia italiana* (In Venice, 1724) I, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1966), p. 127, 950-957.

a central concept which plays the part of a pivot, and is called upon to organise and impress its direction on the dynamics of literature. The consequences of modernistic assimilation and identification of the idea of novelty for the development of literary consciousness are considerable.

Two attitudes become especially evident and fully convincing. Modernity strives to promote the concept of *creation* in every era and throughout the whole of European literature: creation which is spontaneous, authentic, original and radically opposed to all forms of imitation. It is not our intention, at this juncture and in this context, to discuss whether or not, and to what degree, these desiderata correspond completely with reality. This does not alter the crucial fact that the modern mind cultivates, nurtures and propagates a deeply radical and absolute vision of creation. Modernity creates *ex nihilo*, or else does not even exist. One might say that each time creation rejects imitation, either in theory or in practice, the concept of modernity is affirmed: explicitly or implicitly, the demand of modernity paves its way. It consecrates the abandonment of the prototype and the liberation from the yoke imposed by the restriction of the archetype (Plato himself retains this emancipation, which took root and began to be apparent in ancient art).<sup>4</sup> The fundamental tendency resides in the desire to promote the "absolute beginning," it resides in the refusal to recognise any possible precursor. Modernity only establishes itself and sets itself up in this area of the primitive, original miracle, of the irreparable creative act, which is unique and without antecedents or posterity. The modern artist and writer always, and everywhere, start from square one. They reconstruct the universe in a demiurgic spirit which is autonomous and follows its own laws. To be aware of this, independently of the formula, the era and of literature, means that one is essentially modern... A conception such as this, no matter how larval, masked and insignificant it may be from the theoretical point of view, considerably surpasses the boundaries of any historical phenomenology of literary novelty (the invention of new themes, new forms, and new literary genres, etc.). This it to say that, basically speaking, the concept

<sup>4</sup> Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, *Platon et l'art de son temps* (Paris, 1952), p. 7, 12-13.

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of modernity detaches itself from history and loses its historical character (it de-historises itself, as it were) by its retrogressive movement to the initial moment of genesis and of its heterocosmic condition. And this is not its only paradox.

The *evaluation of novelty* is equally important. It is at the same time also a phenomenon observed from the days of antiquity (for even in the *Odyssey* (I, v. 351-352) we find the statement that “men will sing the praises of the newest song they hear”). In the field of literary thought, modernity regularly transforms the objective novelty into an aesthetic value. The historical quality of the factual reality becomes an artistic quality. This transference, which occurs periodically, presides over any and every statement of originality, no matter how excessive the forms which it embraces. Even when it is misrepresented, and corrupted by extravagance, novelty enjoys the great and inexhaustible prestige of surprise, it enjoys the incomparable effectiveness of the emotional shock. Conformist repetition and imitation are negative: the new, the unpublished, is always positive. The result of this is the consistently confirmed effectiveness of the mechanism of renaissance, or re-evaluation, of a new examination and inquiry, which, of necessity, implies the introduction of a new viewpoint, and the adoption of a totally different perspective. The more violent it is, the more efficient it will be. Without this confusion of chronology and quality, modernity would never penetrate the field of values, and novelty would not receive the slightest axiological emphasis. As early as during the time of the Renaissance, Castelvetro observed the agreeable fascination exercised by the novelty of an event (“dilettevole per la novita dell'accidente”).<sup>5</sup> The whole modern technique of “suspense,” no matter how dilapidated and trivialised it may be, does not exploit or amplify any other psychological energy.

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The resolute affirmation of novelty implies *an advanced idea of negation*. To represent a possibility and to gain recognition, novelty must provoke, be aggressive, polemical, it must question—if only by its mere appearance—any given, stable and “former”

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Weinberg, *Castelvetro's Theory of Poetics (Critics and criticism ancient and modern)*, edited by R. S. Crane, Chicago-London, 1965, p. 358.

situation. This is one of the most important contributions made by the concept of modernity to literary aesthetics: *constructive negation*, which Keats termed *negative capability*.<sup>6</sup> This intuition is all the more remarkable because the poet in fact defined with this formula a specific written observation on modern poetry: the pre-eminence of imagination and mystery over reason. Any literary act of negation is modern by impact—this truth has been copiously verified during the glorious era of the *Quarrel of the ancients and moderns* and confirmed by works of criticism throughout the Age of Enlightenment, which embraces increasingly exacerbated formulae, and eventually ends up at the total nihilism of the modern avant-garde, with figures such as Rimbaud and Lautréamont. It must be repeated that non-conformity, the programming of negation, categorical policies of refusal, and the destructive, polemical, rebel mind represent typically modern attitudes. Hence the modern vocation and symbolism of the great rebels in mythology, the Titanism and Satanism of modern consciousness, rich in aggressive and parricidal complexes. Rimbaud in fact is probably right: “Libre aux nouveaux d’exercer les ancêtres”.<sup>7</sup> Without this inner dialectic of affirmative negation, no displacement or shifting of the aesthetic consciousness would be possible, and we should take into account the fact that the very act of having launched and periodically reconfirmed the manifesto of insubordination and insurrection against all forms of stagnation and literary classicism—official looking traditions, principles, dogmas, idols and academic sacredness—is a vital merit of the concept of modernity. The quarrel goes far beyond any possible conflict between generations, far beyond any literary dispute or rivalry. What in fact is at stake is the antimony between *past and present* which extends the alternative of *old and new*, translated into terms of *construction and destruction*. Nothing could be truer than to say that this particular totally negative moment is succeeded by a new process of *re-construction*, on another plane of awareness and realisation. Nonetheless, without an understanding of the immanent logic of perpetual negation, neither

<sup>6</sup> John Keats, *Poems and Selected Letters*, the letter dated Decembre 22nd 1818 (New York, 1962), p. 408.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1967) p. 269.

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assimilation nor an analysis of modernity are possible (modernity being defined as a spiritual category with historical determinations, content, but having no structure). Like any other system within the sphere of literature, the modern system is synchronic, equal to itself (or its own equal), alike in all its phases and in all its functional interdependences.

As a moment of total rupture in the existence of art and literature, modernity introduces this concept of *rupture* by the very mechanism of its own discontinuity. The theoretical reduction of this idea of rupture belongs exclusively to it. The whole meaning of the modern mind and spirit heads towards the establishment and validation—in a continuous, systematic and aggressive sense—of rupture, in all its different forms: organic scission, violent separation, brutal cutting of the umbilical cords. The theory of modern literature implies a refusal and rejection of, plus a radical negation of, plus a categorical hostility towards any type of permanence and continuity, and this in the end results in *an authentic style of negation*. Modernity is *anti* by definition. Each time that the revolt reaches the point of exacerbation and paroxysm, it also reaches the level of theoretical consciousness, and changes into a programme and thus into a consequent method; and each time this occurs one can be sure that modern literary attitudes have reached a phase of complete affirmation. Baudelaire recognises Poe as a leading figure,<sup>8</sup> who, even today, bridges a whole series of ruptures which become more and more headlong, and more and more aggressive. The ultimate limit is total liberation, which is equivalent to total negation and total rupture, and this goes together with an acute feeling (even presentiment) of catastrophe—“the end of an era.” In the final analysis there can no longer be any question of the separation and death of a style, but there can be of the death of *all* style, of the rejection of a type of literature: the negation of *all* possible literature. The natural extension of the concept of modernity is consequently nihilism—the nihilism of *anti-literature*, the contestation of literature which passes into infra- and trans-literature. Without the acknowledgement and, in a sense, without the consecration of the idea of rupture, modern

<sup>8</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (*Histoires*, Paris, 1932), p. 701.

literature would be neither possible, nor intelligible.

This situation is only paradoxical in appearance. One might say that it is insufficiently discussed in those studies dedicated to the spirit of modern literature: literature separates itself from itself in order to re-establish itself in its own essence. The profound sense of rupture is the recuperation of lost *purity*, the return to the primordial and the authentic, the reconversion of literature into poetry. The operation belongs not to negation, but to regeneration and compensation. The idea of modernity implies, essentially, this huge effort of purification and de-alienation of poetry, the categorical rupture with all the obstacles and all the barriers which corrupt its essence: barriers that are rational, ideological, social and economic. The isolation and non-conformity of poets and modern poetry, the most anarchical and radical orientations of this latter, the most violent social contestation (Rimbaud's "le temps des assassins"), the whole political commitment and involvement of the avant-garde, all this, between the lines as it were, and as in a watermark, has inscribed a huge aspiration towards lost innocence, the wonderful dream, often Orphic, of pure poetry, immaculate and absolute poetry. Poetry branches away from non-poetry and becomes what it is itself: primitive, savage, essentially lyrical. In this sense all those people who understand modern poetry to mean *all genuine poetry of all time*<sup>9</sup> are right. In any event the roots of the modern concept of poetry sink deep towards the first radical dissociations of concept and image, towards the first acknowledgements and clear definitions of poetic logic, with G. B. Vico as a central figure. The coupling of the ideas of modernity and purity is in effect modern. This attitude was already a current one in the symbolist period. But in fact it embraces and defines far older aesthetic realities and orientations: all the poetry of *ingenium* is opposed to that of *ars* and is distinctly modern from this point of view, in a latent and broader way. The erupting, native and spontaneous inspiration of the genius also belongs to budding modernity.

To all this, modern consciousness adds a considerable and deeply specific coefficient of lucidity and theoretical development. Modernity is defined by *reflexivity* and *self-analysis*. It unco-

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Read, *Form in Modern Poetry* (London 1948), p. 401.



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vers, transmits and imposes on the literary spirit the pre-eminence of introspection and the statement of problems. It is under the auspices of the concept of modernity that one of the most important mutations of the concept of literature emerges, and this transforms itself further and further into a contemplation of its own condition and possibility of existence. Literature has always been imbued with a certain aesthetic awareness, either latent or openly declared. But it is really only in this present period—under the impetus of the constant justification of its new attitude towards itself, which is fundamentally thoroughly negativist and purist—that literature reaches the stage of giddy, insistent and discursive development, both intellectual and theoretical. It is a fact that modern literature can no longer be conceived and understood other than in its aesthetic project and programme, the diversity of which culminates in vast proportions, and eventually pulverization.

The progressive transformation of literature into a reflection, with considerable proportions, of its essence, its technique and its limitations not only represents the observation of critics, but also the contestation of a whole series of writers, who, in the first place, always become real commentators, essayists and critics of their own works, and then critics of the language and of literary communication, in a more or less professional way. The phenomenon is consubstantial with modern lucidity, with the position of distance assumed with regard to the literary object—an attitude which is transformed into an incessant question, an automatic experience and verification of literature. The modern creator searches for himself by explaining himself and explains himself by self-analysis. Way back, Rivarol accused Rousseau of writing “without consciousness”.<sup>10</sup> It is certain that the Romantic writer does not know his own secret. For him the mystery of creation is still whole and impenetrable. It is precisely this enigma, felt to be a serious insufficiency, that the modern spirit eliminates, and extirpates by the roots. It *knows* what it is doing. Paul Valéry blushes simply at the idea of any resemblance with Pythia, priestess of Apollo. We always find the same central attitude and concept in Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, André Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre, to mention just

<sup>10</sup> Rivarol, *Journal politique national et autres textes* (Paris 1964), p. 255.

part of the avant-garde; this attitude is programmatic and aimed at theoretical developments by its very militant reason: literature is an intellectual gesture which, once and for all, has taken hold of and developed its own mechanism, at a time of tremendous reflexivity, elucidation and demystification of procedures. Literature has said everything; all that is left for it to do is “to call itself itself” (se dire elle-même), to talk only of itself, with some reflection on the way “in which it is written”.<sup>11</sup> In a paradoxical way the last consequences of lucidity, creation and the possibility of inventing and rendering articulate an autonomous universe result from the inevitable transformation of means into ends, and from the conversion of the literary project—in its really final form of a theoretical programme—into a work which is a programme. What use are literary theories? Clearly—the answer will come back to us from the various convergent directions—to set up, *in* and *by virtue of* the very act itself, theoretical developments, a book, or an alternative and equivalent construction of creation.

The defensive or propagandist requirements of modern literature do intervene to some extent—for modern literature is constantly constrained to controversy, polemics, explanations, consolidation, verification and continual argumentation. Hence results an avalanche—not only put into effect, but also theoretically formulated, and programmatic—of prefaces, notations, manifestos, counter-manifestos, notebooks, creative magazines, open letters, confessions, interviews—all this represents a completely characteristic phenomenon of the modern literary mentality. But what above all remains decisive is the process of the theoretical treatment of literature as an instrument of self-knowledge, self-control and self-realisation. Between the work and the theory one can no longer find any clearcut and determining distinction. The modern spirit brings about a harmony, a concurrence between the poet and the poetic. It gives to literary thought and thinking its supreme effectiveness, recognises its pre-eminence and above all the autonomy of its strivings and initiative.

This fact is the direct and immediate consequence of the renovating, negativist and reflective vocation of modern

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris, 1959), p. 314.

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consciousness, seen as a fundamental and categorical manner of conceiving and defining literature. By virtue of its very essence, modernity represents a moment of liberation and contradiction, of lucidity and rationalisation. From this comes its tendency to repudiate stagnation and perpetual synchronisation—operations which both imply a certain permanent revolution: opposition to and suppression of any obstacles and barriers set up on the road to novelty. This would be more or less impossible without the massive and decisive intervention of what is currently called the “critical mind,” conceived as a method of contestation and interrogation, as well as a demand for and a continual theoretical formulation of the right to examine freely. It is evident that modernity transmits to literary aesthetics, by means of different ideological variations and historical contexts, the consciousness of insurrection and the need for liberalisation; it is also clear that it provokes and stimulates emancipation, and the fertile non-conformism of creation. In any given era or period, the moderns are promoters of *freedom* in art and in literature. This is something of a truism, but it is also an essential truth, and cannot be avoided in any general perspective such as this. The moderns inculcate the mind with literary rebellion and contestation. Once again, by this gesture alone, modernity demonstrates its super-historical, ritual dimension. In the history of literary ideas, to be modern signifies that a person periodically questions the legitimacy, and thus the very status, of the literary idea. Modernity and the modern protagonist replace classical stability and security with the doubt, uncertainty, variability (and consequently the relativism) of the definition and modality of the reception of literature.

The manifestly rationalist and critical vocation of the modern mind—by definition investigatory, sceptical and Cartesian—deserves some attention. Since the first studies dedicated to the history of the *Quarrel of the ancients and moderns*—starting with the well-worn book by Hippolyte Rigault (who caught the attention of Sainte-Beuve) and finishing with Hubert Gillot and Richard Foster Jones (to mention just one or two purely indicative landmarks)—whole chapters have been devoted to this rationalist heredity, which has been retrospectively studied down the ages through classicism, the Renaissance, the Middle

Ages, right back to antiquity. It is no longer paradoxical to talk nowadays of the modernism of the sophists and the contrary tendency: the codification of art, radically opposed to the spirit of research.<sup>12</sup> If one misses out on the mediaeval stage, and the Renaissance, which both offer enough arguments in favour of the existence of a *Quarrel*, before the *Quarrel of the ancients and moderns*,<sup>13</sup> one can well ask oneself, to put it briefly, what is the meaning of the modern polemics in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Three motive concepts in all probability make their appearance in the field of philosophy and science: experience, reason and demonstration, all joined together in their demand for free investigation, superior to all traditional knowledge, referring right back to the ancient authorities (Egyptian, Greek and Latin), with Aristotle leading the list. The revolt against these intolerant masters of thought was conducted under the name of the principle of the *Philosophia libera*, the title of an English work by Nathaniel Carpenter (1621). Pascal's *Préface pour le traité du vide* (1647) is a classical French text, rigourously pleading in favour of a rational truth which is superior to the prestige and authority of the ancients. The literary implications of the new mentality are considerable and all have as their point of departure the suppression of the inferiority complex and a profound and total modification of the way of seeing things: a rejection, in the name of reason and common sense, of the conventional admiration accorded to classical authors, together with the desire to promote a new literary generation, which is spiritually emancipated and removed from intellectual conditioning and conformism.<sup>14</sup> These characteristic reactions are summed up with remarkable clarity by the two texts of Bussy-Rabutin and La Motte-Houdar. The former makes all adherence to the concept of classicism subordinate to rational control: "On doit avoir du respect pour les ouvrages des grands hommes de l'antiquité, j'en demeure d'accord, mais seulement jusqu'aux sentiments qui

<sup>12</sup> Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, *op. cit.*, p. 21, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Baron, *The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns as a Problem for: Renaissance Scholarship*, in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, no. 1, January, 1959 pp. 3-22.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Foster Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Background of the Battle of the Books* (St. Louis, 1936), pp. 15-17, 68-71 and 124-153.

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choquent le bon sens.” (One should have respect for the works of the great men of antiquity, I am perfectly in agreement with this, but only as far as the feelings which shock common sense are concerned). The latter explains very clearly the tactics of the new aesthetic policy: the promotion of modern literary ideas by new agents, namely by the young: “Tout nôtre espoir est dans une génération nouvelle, dans une génération qui n’ait point encore fléchi sous les autorités et qui n’ait pas crié pendant trente ou quarante ans au miracle, et qui, par la longue habitude de se passionner ainsi, n’ait pas pris une espèce d’engagement contre la raison”<sup>15</sup> (All our hope rests in a new generation, in a generation which has so far in no way yielded to the authorities, and which, for thirty or forty years, has not called out for the miracle, and which, because of its long custom of involvement of this sort, has not taken up any kind of position of commitment against reason). In terms of present language, it is therefore a question of real conditioning: once the state of mind which is favourable to the moderns has been provoked, and once the basic error which is opposed to them has been denounced—on the theoretical plane and at the level of propaganda—all the inferences must be drawn. In the literary order, and in the words of Fontenelle, they are called: “vues fausses,” “mauvais raisonnements,” “Sottises,” “diverses sortes d’erreurs,” “diverses degrés d’impertinences”<sup>16</sup> (wrong views, false reasonings, nonsense, various kinds of error, various degrees of impertinence) (but the polemical vocabulary is infinitely richer), and these inferences can be classified in three categories of prejudices, the great *pet aversions* of the moderns.

Because it is imposed, removed from control, and dogmatized, the whole privileged position of *authority* remains deeply irritating—and the modern mind is quick to separate the idea of authority from that of value. It is not so much the objective presence or absence of the intrinsic merit of a classical author that is under discussion, as the publicity, the method of

<sup>15</sup> Hubert Gillot, *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes en France* (Paris, 1914), p. 404, 555; similarly: René Bray, *La Formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris, 1966), p. 118, 124, 202.

<sup>16</sup> Werner Krauss and Hans Kortum, *Antike und Moderne in der Literaturdiskussion des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1966), p. 60.

transmission, and above all the method of imposing his prestige, which is removed from all possibility of verification, thanks to various interdictions which are tantamount to genuine “sacralisations.” Protestations of this kind can be heard in the works of Bacon (*Novum Organon*, I, 84) and Montaigne (*Essais*, I, II, ch. 10, 12), and all these protestations smack more or less of the stake and become suspect of potential literary heresy. Because the evolution of the modern critical spirit carries on at a dizzy rate in the direction of desacralisation, in the direction of the total laicization of the literary object and the manner of conception. Furthermore, in the 18th century, there was the frequent discussion centering around the struggle against literary superstitions, which were totally assimilated to religious and clerical prejudices. The Age of Enlightenment radicalises the iconoclastic impetus of modernism.

This *devaluation of antiquity* gives rise to important consequences, as well as to an even greater notoriety, to such a degree that—due to over-simplification—one can affirm a tendency to restrict the definition of modernity, together with its contribution to the development of aesthetic thought, to the one single observation: novelty. The depreciation of the concept of the ancient, carried on with a simultaneous and ostentatious estimation of novelty, derives entirely from the undermining of the principle of authority, which invests every work, source and traditional principle which are historically perpetuated. In his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688) Fontenelle rejects “l’admiration excessive des Anciens” (excessive admiration of the Ancients). If we consider d’Alembert, he in his turn disapproves of “l’admiration aveugle portée à l’antiquité” (the blind admiration given to antiquity) in his *Discours préliminaire de l’Encyclopédie* (1781). This far the formulae are symmetrical, and to such an extent that we find ourselves confronted by a veritable *topos* of the concept of modernity. Its core is made up of various equivalent, interdependent concepts which are closely allied and which have a circular frequency and cycle of re-appearance. The same essential definition of modernity is to be found throughout the 17th, 18th, 19th or 20th centuries, with just very slight variations. The basic semantics of the idea of modernity implies, by its very essence, the abolition of the

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ancient, out-of-date work. Modernity consistently devotes its efforts to anti-traditional discoveries.

One can make the same essential observations with regard to the total *anti-classicism* of the idea of modernity, the customary antithesis of what is classical, which only finds its true clarification thanks to a rigorous and methodical examination of all the aberrations and all the oppositions concerning those principles and interdictions which are typically classical. An examination such as this shows us the negative picture of modernity, seen as an open system of reactions and liberations made by successive breaches and ruptures which are effected in the system of specifically classical concepts and standards.

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Seen in this light, the contribution of modernity to the emancipation of literary thought is not simply a conceptual one: it is functional too. The concept of modernity periodically determines all the pressures of agitation and all the reactions inherent to the evasion and escape from rupture, all the reactions inherent in anticonformist reaction, in other words all the possible forms of literary rupture, starting with the essential detachment of “literature” itself, as an expression of literary tradition and culture. We have already considered the inner meaning of modern negation: the recovery of the essence of poetry. The whole history of the concept of literature is dominated and stimulated by this continual dialectic confrontation: *literature* (*id est*, erudition, traditional literary culture, classical or class-cised culture, together with its whole authoritarian system of dogmatised principles) and *poetry*, conceived as a programme and method of emancipation and reconversion to the opposite pole: the pole of spontaneity, original lyricism, which is authentic and pure. Now, in this endless controversy, the role of modernity consists precisely in the annulment, the disorganisation, and the tractability of the classical system of interdictions. The proposal of modernity is the diametrically opposed alternative: that of relativism and the progressive opening up of all the key literary concepts, starting off with that of beauty. In the place of the concept of beauty as absolute, eternal, immutable, universal, modernity proposes the concept of beauty as something

relative, historical, subject to gradual development, and conspicuously specific. In short, the idea of modernity *liberalises* the aesthetic consciousness of literature. This is why authoritarian and dogmatic ideological systems and regimes are by definition anti-modern. The present divorce that has taken place between the artistic avant-garde and the political avant-garde and that has been followed by conflicts, excommunications and drastic sanctions, in fact revives (even if the forms are more aggressive) a traditional situation, which is continually verified by means of different historical forms, starting with the ancient absolutist or theological sanctions and rigorous systems.

One of the first consequences has to do with the liberation of the concept of the *creation* of all possible codifications and restrictions, of all models, all static (or fixed) genres, and above all of rules. The person who is stimulated by those literary convictions which are in effect modern absolutely rejects any principle of conformism and imitation. Any anti-canonical, anti-normative or anti-dogmatic action is pre-eminently modern. In these cases it is not the value of the negation which is significative, but the gesture in itself, for its own sake. The negation may be superficial, unmotivated, or even absurd. The tendency towards negation is no less modern for this. This is the case with the avant-garde groups of all eras: the fundamentally anti-classical permanent and universal phenomena of negation. From the Renaissance onwards the European spirit consistently ends up by contesting the classical models and dogmas, the rules and canons (Giordano Bruno, Torquato Tasso, Jacopo Mazzone are the precursors of this attitude) which is a sign that the modern mentality has started to penetrate and make itself felt.

One can glean at random various credos, such as: "It must be agreed—in the words of Saint-Evrémond—that the Poetics of Aristotle is an excellent work: however, nothing is that perfect in it to order all our concepts and every century."<sup>17</sup> Literary history, in time and space, can be neither disciplined nor determined. Modernity, by nature, includes surprise and indetermination. Its anti-normative disposition is huge and irresistible: "Modernity—affirms Herder, among others—has

<sup>17</sup> Saint-Evrémond, *Critique littéraire* (Paris, 1921), p. 106.



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no fixed rule for the beautiful and the great.”<sup>18</sup> This credo can also be found among the Romantics, but it is more radically formulated—in a revolutionary style—as we see from the words of Victor Hugo in his preface to *Cromwell*: “Let us destroy theories, poetics and systems. Let us abolish all this old plaster which hides the facade of art! There are no rules or models: or rather, there are no rules other than the general laws of nature which embrace the whole of art...”<sup>19</sup> There is nothing new in this world... and in the manifestos of the modern avant-garde we find the same solidarity between *modern style* and the *anti-norm*, as is shown in the *First Preface* of the *De Stijl* movement (1917) which proclaims: “The disappearance of the prejudicial basis according to which the modern artist works by conforming to pre-established theories. On the contrary, it will become quite clear that the modern work of art is not really born from accepted *a priori* theories, but that, in quite the opposite sense, it is the principles which derive from plastic work.” The prestige of normative perfection fades when confronted by the idea of the invention and spontaneity of creation.

The modern hierarchy therefore replaces this principle of *imitation* with that of *emulation*, the value of which is loudly declared. When the authority of classical writers was in a position to be overwhelming, sterile and stifling, the numerous expressions of revolt which could be heard within European culture—even if somewhat sporadic since the Middle Ages—give plentiful proof of it. The pedagogy of the Renaissance goes through just such a crisis, in which the concept of *aemulatio*, which we find illustrated as far back as Petrarch (*Familiari*, II, 20) and which is highly esteemed by all progressive humanists, provides the beginnings of a solution. The revolutionary spirit of the new principle can only be firmly understood if one links it with the fact that a humanist such as Niccolò Niccoli never wrote a word all his life because he was absolutely convinced that the ancients could not be bettered in any way whatsoever. To emulate them, or even to claim any sort of equality with them, had an after-taste of sacrilege. One surrendered to an exaggerated conception

<sup>18</sup> Herder, *Ursachen des gesunkenen Geschmacks bei den verschiedenen Völkern* (Berlin, 1775), p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Hugo, *Théâtre* (Paris, 1880), I, p. 43-44.

of antiquity itself, the same antiquity which, in the *Traité du sublime* of the pseudo Longin, nonetheless admitted that imitation could constitute a possible emulation (chap. XIII). The moderns, for their part, reject any such servitude, even if—originally—they make use of reverential and respectful forms. When they prove themselves to be perspicacious, the classics in their turn begin to condemn the plagiarist, they condemn servile imitation, and pilfering. Chapelain recommends imitation, but only in the meaning and spirit of art. Of course, among other things, there is an intervention by methods of control, and by the rational movement of putting on the brakes: "I do not intend to propose that the ancients should be models except for whatever they have done in a reasonable fashion."<sup>20</sup> The criterion of reason, therefore, in a modern spirit, turns against its own point of departure. Apart from the obscurities of the classics, it is permissible to imitate, La Motte adds—La Motte was a kind of literary rebel, full of decorum. Furthermore, the principle of the direct emulation of nature dispenses with the obligation to imitate written texts. Even the classics followed no other procedure and the moderns are not guilty of irreverence by acting in harmony with them. Creative concurrence or competition becomes not only possible but perfectly legitimate.

Important mutations likewise appear in the area of the traditional concept of *taste*. The moderns are the representatives of the *new taste*, which is superior to the *old taste* in every respect. The result of this is thus one of the most important processes of hierarchical restructuring and dissociations of values in the history of aesthetic ideas, thanks to a dual polemic: against the anchylosis and the universality of taste, considered as a synthesis of literary norms, grafted on to a far more evolved sensitivity. The response to the classics who postulate the existence of eternal taste is that the change of taste does not, as a consequence, imply and induce its decadence. We therefore find the intervention of a process of liberalisation of taste—like a snowball process—which has multiple causes: the collaboration of aesthetic, historical, psychological, social and national factors. The result of this convergence is—either tacitly or openly

<sup>20</sup> Philippe van Tieghem, *Les grandes doctrines littéraires en France*, (Paris, 1965), p. 34-35.

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expressed—the identification of *good taste* with *modern taste*, quite simply, and this is undoubtedly implicit in a thesis such as that of the Chevalier de Mère: “One should follow neither rules nor methods, unless good taste has approved them.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the expressions of *modern taste*, which increasingly replace those of *new taste* in the course of the 18th century,<sup>22</sup> are precise proof of this consciousness, just as the need for evolution by synchronisation with the requirements of a new sensibility and inner reality. Where Madame de Staël is concerned “a revolution in letters” is equivalent to “giving the widest latitude, in any genre, to the rules of taste.”<sup>23</sup> Even if only in passing, we should observe that the concept of liberalised, modernised taste—*liberty taste*—is still intact today.<sup>24</sup>

As a contagious phenomenon of fashion, modern taste at the same time begins to lay claim to a social dimension. From this moment on the distant bases are established of what we now call the *sociology of taste*, which, in the context of this present investigation, is associated with the concept of modern style, and which it is impossible to understand without certain collective data: circulation, public, success, and, by extension, mass media. *The Quarrel of the ancients and moderns* begins to do precisely this: it begins to translate this controversy about the idea of success with the public; its legitimate status becomes not only a theoretical problem, but at the same time an immediate and acute preoccupation. Because the moderns, downtrodden by the prestige of the classics, lay claim, for their part, to the following of the present, contemporary public; the examination of the new taste thus becomes direct and spontaneous. It is quite clear that the idea of modernity implies sociability, in all its forms, with regard to literature, art, and the institution. Hence results, in addition, the appearance of the typically modern programme: “One must write in a modern style” (Théophile de Viau). In a *Dialogue de la Mode et de la*

<sup>21</sup> René Bray, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (Edinburgh, 1764), p. 128; Marmontel, *Essai sur le goût (Œuvres complètes)*, Paris, 1787, IV, pp. 352, 356, 433 and 436); d’Argens, *Lettres juives*, 1737 (Werner Krauss-Hans Kortum, *op. cit.* pp. 238, 244).

<sup>23</sup> Madame de Staël, *De la littérature*, II, chap. II (Paris, 1959), II, p. 296.

<sup>24</sup> Gillo Dorfles, *Le oscillazioni del gusto* (Milan, 1966), p. 45.

*Nature* (1662), which is based on a precious level of inspiration, the discussion turns in fact around a key problem, under the wing of an apparent “gallant” superficiality: the need for change is set against natural and classical stability; the rigorous and primitive intransigence of nature gives way to adaptable flexibility, and thus to conformism; the authentic makes room for social conditioning.<sup>25</sup> Novelty represents the most effective instrument of success. The baroque moralists, such as Baltasar Gracián, inscribe this principle in their manuals and textbooks of practical morality (*El oraculo manual*, 3).

For the same reasons, modern taste becomes localised, and nationalised. Modernity is opposed to universal, super-temporal, and super-national taste. This abstraction makes way for ethnic idiosyncrasies and reactions, defined by the “custom of the country” which are the reflex of a clearly determined phase of its historical evolution. Modernity uncovers, discovers, institutes and cultivates the national complex of literature, which, in the ideologies of South-Eastern Europe, will find itself being described by the term: national specific, which has existed and been handed down for a long time in Rumanian ideology. It is the equivalent of the romantic “genius of the peoples,” seen as a fundamental element of literary novelty and originality—this is an eminently modern conclusion which dates back to the 17th century, when the discovery was made that “the tastes of different nations are different,” because they are subject to historical and geographical circumstances, and, even more important, “to the spirit of our nation,” in the French species (Fr. Ogier).<sup>26</sup> The roots of this orientation could be traced until the time of the Renaissance. It gives rise to national myths, scholarly parallels, literary and extra-literary comparisons, all interpreted in favour of the moderns,<sup>27</sup> once more imbued with the function of the archetype, and the original phenomenon. When in association with a symbolic cosmic framework, the national archetype in turn gives rise to proper spiritual categories,

<sup>25</sup> Roger Lathuillère, *La Préciosité* (Geneva, 1966), I, pp. 148-149, p. 611.

<sup>26</sup> François Ogier, *Préface to Tyr et Sidon* by Jean de Schelandre, 1628 (Roger Fayolle, *La critique*, Paris, 1964, p. 196-197).

<sup>27</sup> Hubert Gillot, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 86, 131, 212-213; Rene Bray, *op. cit.*, pp. 58 and 320.

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which are completely established in the 18th century: gothic, nordic, Scandinavian etc..

The direct consequence of this is a new attitude with regard to literary language, a radical conversion to expression as used in modern living languages, the superiority of which when compared with dead classical languages inspires long, persistent and passionate polemics. We know, furthermore, that one of the causes of the *Quarrel* in the 17th century resided in the dilemma: in what language should the wording of public monuments be drawn up? The origins of the scepticism surrounding the Greek and Latin languages should also be looked for in the Renaissance, even if only in fleeting forms and even if the audience it enjoyed was not a large one. One can nonetheless observe from this time onwards that each language possesses its own perfection (L. Bruni), and its own superiority (Du Bellay). The pedagogy of the period in turn finds its discontent penetrated by the way young students study dead and useless languages. Reason talks in every language. One can therefore express oneself just as well in French as in Greek or Latin. But this in no way means that one is an equal of Homer if one reads him in the original—as was very justifiably thought and said in the 18th century. The rehabilitation is total: The French language is as abundant, elegant, harmonious and precise as Greek." At the same period Giulio Cesare Beccelli<sup>28</sup> makes analogous remarks about the Italian language. This is the first phase which paved the way of the discovery and appreciation of folklore, national literary traditions, nationalism and romantic traditionalism.

In effect, modernity represents an extremely convincing illustration of literary *progress*, a chapter of vast proportions about the general theory of progress, which unfolds all the developments implicit in new concepts: simulation, free creation, critical spirit, evolution, actuality etc., all circulated by the *Quarrel*. These concepts are inter-connected and almost synonymous: modernity is the product of progress, progress is modern by definition. But this—which proceeds from the essence of social success—depends on the nuance that the idea of modern style

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108, 260-264, 433-437; Roger Lathuillère, *op. cit.*, I, p. 585; Francisque Vial-Louis Denise, *Idées et doctrines littéraires du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1926), pp. 10-12; Giovanni Getto, *La Storia letteraria (Tecnica e teoria letteraria)* Milan, 1951, II, p. 163.

represents the popular, divulged and almost vulgar experience of the idea of progress, reinforced considerably by impact and circulation in the literary public, which is a widespread and consolidated idea, thanks to good publicity. For, during the period of the *Quarrel of the ancients and moderns*, modern style is the prototype of the *slogan* and starlet concepts, launched by procedures which undergo considerable development: brochures, pamphlets, parodies, polemics, discourses, essays, the united interest of influential social groups and milieus (salons, academies, the Court), all of them very effective methods, aimed at changing the taste of the public by means of real propaganda action. In the Age of Enlightenment the technique of this anti-classicising subversion, together with the whole task of undermining the ideology of the *ancien régime*, takes on considerable proportions.<sup>29</sup>

To concentrate on the essential part of this complicated and extensive debate, one can affirm that the effectively modern contribution of the concept of modernity to the theory of progress consists in a fully justified dissociation of the specific conditions of *literary* and *scientific* (and by extension artistic) progress. When the rhythm of progress is a slow one in the sciences—because of continual accumulations and acquisitions—it is unforeseeable and unrepeatable in the artistic and literary field. In other words, the moderns are in a position to catch up with and overtake the classics without having to go through the intermediary stages. Contemporary writers, modern *eo ipso*, can thus reach a state of perfection at one go, by missing out the chronological steps. Du Bos even puts the dots on the 'i's: "The arts and letters do not come to their state of perfection by way of a slow progress which is proportionate to the time used to develop them, but on the contrary by way of rapid progress." This leads one to the conclusion that the works of modern writers and artists have no need of any preparatory stage or any stage of evolution in order to rival classical works. It is enough for a new personality to make his appearance, to emerge, for literature to follow another course. Wotton, Marmontel and various others profess similar ideas,<sup>30</sup> the direction of which

<sup>29</sup> Werner Krauss, *Ueber der Anteil der Buchgeschichte an der literarischen Entfaltung der Aufklärung (Studien zur deutschen und französischen Aufklärung)* Berlin, 1963, pp. 87-96, 147-155.

<sup>30</sup> Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (Paris,

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is the recuperation and the annulment, by a single stroke of the pen, of the historical time-lag which exists between the classics and modern writers and artists.

Another dissociation appears less justified and, in any event, requires some specification and analysis; it is furthermore entirely in conformity with the theory of constant progress, undefined and limitless, which is the hallmark of the Age of Enlightenment. When one can totally confirm this law in the field of the sciences, the arts and artistic taste often pass through periods of stagnation which are liable to alterations and stages of decadence. “The art of using ideas for works of the mind can go astray: letters collapse, criticism and taste vanish, writers become ridiculous or vulgar, but the fount of the human spirit will always be on the increase among men” (Marivaux). Progress, in this light, would thus be limited: “Time—says Turgot—never stops bringing new discoveries to light in the sciences; but poetry, painting and music have a fixed point, determined by the spirit of languages, the imitation of nature, the restricted sensitivity of our ears, which they reach by slow stages, and beyond which they cannot go.”<sup>31</sup> In short, two typical arguments, as it were, of general paternity state the case in favour of literary progress. Given that nature evolves, and that art imitates nature, art evolves of necessity. Saint-Evrémond, among others, deals with a similar syllogism. The second is most completely expressed by Charles Perrault: “The deeper and more exact knowledge acquired by man’s heart and by man’s most finest and most delicate feelings, by virtue of penetrating it” (*Parallèles...* II, dial. III). Literary progress would thus be seen as the result of an analytical exercise, of a new vision of the human soul. Modernity sets itself up to promote the consciousness of literature which is subjective and introspective.

The virtualities of a critical order, which are astonishingly inter-connected in certain orientations of modern literary criticism, reveal themselves to be even more contemporary, and destined

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1770), II, p. 134; Werner Krauss-Hans Kortum, *op. cit.*, p. 220, 295; Marmontel, *op. cit.*, pp. 362, 368 and 389.

<sup>31</sup> Marivaux, *Le Miroir*, 1755 (Francisque Vial-Louis Denise, *op. cit.*, p. 68); Turgot, *Second Discours sur les progrès successifs de l’esprit humain*, 1750 (*Œuvres*, Paris, 1844, II, p. 605-606).

to a great and effectively modern career, which in itself would merit an in-depth examination. First and foremost it would seem evident that, from the 18th century onwards, the same affirmation of the idea of modernity impresses a powerful impetus on literary criticism, which is organically associated with the whole effort and spirit of the age. Time, history and tradition make their selections in an absurd and arbitrary way. Classical values enjoy an unmeasured prestige, conferred upon them by inertia, prejudices and conformism. Modern taste rejects out of hand this servitude: "Homer—in the words of La Motte—is amenable to the free examination of reason. Authority and tradition are not literary concretisations." This principle arouses a powerful echo—given that it responds to a new spiritual necessity—which, if the truth be told, gives literary criticism its first philosophical status, and in any event its first theoretical status: "By refusing to bow down before Homer, La Motte did for literature what Descartes did for philosophy." The comparison should not be taken too literally, but simply in the sense of a new profession of methodological faith. Because of the interpretation of the modern critics of the time, literary criticism gives voice, as from that moment, to its methodological and systematic vocation. One begins to discover this truth, which only finally becomes general in the course of recent decades, that one cannot deal with literary criticism without a close collaboration and a convergence of the methods (humanist, ideological, scientific) and above all without a certain latent or precise philosophical option. Abbé Terrasson sees this fairly clearly, in his own manner and language: "One must introduce into the appreciation of literary works the same rationalist spirit as into philosophical or scientific studies. It is reason, not the authority of tradition, and not the authority of universal approval, which is the natural arbiter of works of the mind."<sup>32</sup>

Literary criticism thus goes beyond the stage of empirical or dogmatic analyses or judgements. It tends to become a discipline of the mind, a sort of *Geisteswissenschaft* in embryonic form. The proof that things are like this resides among other things

<sup>32</sup> La Motte, *Discours sur Homère*, 1714; Abbé de Pons, *Lettre sur "l'Iliade" de la Motte*, 1714; Abbé Terrasson, *Dissertation critique sur l'Iliade*, 1715 (Francisque Vial-Louis Denise, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7, 16-17, 32-34).



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in the fact that the advocated critical method only takes into account the rational and objective principles of art (probability, common sense, good taste, decorum) and of the verification of the technical qualities—in short, of the literary *trade*. In other words, this type of criticism evolves in the direction of a criticism of content and formal values, stylistic values which are basically neo-classical in attitude and orientation.<sup>33</sup> This is a rather paradoxical but perfectly logical situation: the rationalist orientation of the critical mind could only result, in the field of the analysis of literature, in a similar critical course, under the auspices of intellectual taste. Effective modernisation, in the sense of a transformation which would render critical judgement something relative and subjective, reveals itself in another direction: that of an increasingly consequent confrontation and junction between absolute and objective literary observations and judgements and the relative co-ordinates of the literary work of a historical and geographical order. The dialectic consists of: classical (universal) principles—historico-national (specific) realities which already emerge in the work of Dryden (the age in which I live; my own country)<sup>34</sup>—represent the path which future historical criticism, and later sociological criticism, are to take. In aesthetics, the path which leads towards the very large typologies (classical, Romantic, Nordic and Southern literature, and as far as the Dionysiac, the Apollonian, *Vollendung* and *Unendlichkeit* etc.) starts essentially from the same critical antinomy: *classical-modern*, the real crossroads of aesthetic directions. If one admitted the permanence and the universality of these two literary categories, one could envisage the whole history of criticism and literary aesthetics in a similar perspective and write in a consequent fashion.

What is the present situation? The appearance of unclassifiable, semi-theoretical, semi-poetic works by the poet-cum-critic turns literature into a veritable critical act. There is one indisputable phenomenon: criticism invades literature, merges with it, gives it a new sense and a new dimension—a huge hypertrophy which dubs its radius of action. The fact is: the work begins to

<sup>33</sup> Hubert Gillot, *op. cit.*, pp. 501-503, 534-535.

<sup>34</sup> John Dryden, *An Essay of dramatic poesy*, 1668 (Allen H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism, Plato to Dryden*, Detroit, 1962, pp. 601-602).

demonstrate itself, to disengage its latent meanings, through reading and critical interpretation—the permanent and fundamental function of all criticism. But at the same time, by itself becoming critical literature, this new criticism is, to an equal measure, constrained to devote itself to the meditation and investigation of its own objective, which at once institutes and justifies it. Criticism consequently becomes a central point of convergence and interference of both planes, the geometrical point where literature becomes criticism and criticism becomes literature, the primary language (text-object) and the secondary language (criticism-subject), by superimposing themselves until they become identical. From this emerges a reciprocal and permanent exchange of suggestions, associations, dissociations, analyses and syntheses, within the framework of which critical reading and reflection form an indissoluble whole, an indissociable organic unity. This whole process obliges criticism to make a very serious effort to reconvert itself, to impose upon itself a structural modification of its programme and method. In as far as it is obliged or intends to remain only critical—by adopting an attitude of reflection, investigation and appreciation of its derivation (criticism-literature), criticism is really *obliged* to transform itself *ipso facto* into a predominantly theoretical criticism of a special type. If modern literature has an ever greater tendency to affirm itself as a critical awareness (programmatic, aesthetic, experimental etc.), the criticism of literary ideas becomes, of necessity (in comparison with the actual inner moment of literature) the most immediate critical activity, the only form of pertinent criticism which is totally adequate to the theoretical and problematic vocation of modern literature. *The critique of criticism* thus becomes not only possible, but obligatory, in the complete meaning of the word: *a critique of the critical consciousness of literature*.

Criticism has never been made without relating to concepts, without an innate or explicit aesthetic perspective. But in our times literature itself constrains criticism to submit to this theoretical regime. What, in the past, constituted nothing more than an external perspective of literature, represents, in the present period, a functional determination, from the inner aspect of literature. From this emerges the present critical “explosion” (with many

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many premises, in the flourish of commentaries in 18th century periodicals) which Baudelaire, Mallarmé and above all Lautréamont fully anticipated. In fact Lautréamont makes some sarcastic comment about it (*Poésies*, II, 1870): “Judgements about poetry are of more value than poetry. They are the philosophy of poetry. In this light philosophy encompasses poetry. Poetry cannot do without philosophy. And philosophy cannot do without poetry”<sup>35</sup> (Les jugements sur la poésie ont plus de valeur que la poésie. Ils sont la philosophie de la poésie. La philosophie, ainsi comprise, englobe la poésie. La poésie ne pourra pas se passer de la philosophie. La philosophie ne pourra se passer de la poésie). But it is above all the theories of Oscar Wilde in *The Critic as Artist* (1880) which illustrate a rare power of anticipation: “By developing the critical mind... we shall become absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word”; “the most modern form of creation” is: criticism; “the critical faculty” of creation; “it is far harder to talk about literature than it is to write it.” One should particularly note the following prophecy: “The future belongs to criticism.”<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates all the virtualities as well as the capacity of adaptation of the concepts of modernity to the present development of the literary spirit: it is reflective, critical, and dominated by an acutely problematical consciousness of literature.

In recent decades criticism has undoubtedly gone through one of the most important periods in its history. What seemed to be paradoxical in the writings of Wilde and others, or what seemed to be the Utopia of an aesthete, has been fully realised by our age: literary criticism has become an autonomous genre, with hypertrophic tendencies, which is on the point of engulfing the whole of literature. Furthermore, criticism has always imposed its objectives, its methods, and its specific style, and, in the last analysis, it has succeeded in being read for its own sake and, quite often, only for its own sake. We, the moderns, read criticism like we read poetry or novels: for the pleasure of its validity, for the subtlety of the analysis of its readings, for the point of view of its interpretations. Its progress is huge and the great intellectual evolution of the public has given it even

<sup>35</sup> Comte de Lautréamont, *Œuvres Complètes*, (Paris, 1969). p. 384.

<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Works* (London, Collins) pp. 291, 293, 322 and 345.

more vigour. Our age has discovered this new and very modern pleasure, which is at once literary and para-literary: *Criticism* with a capital C, within the framework of which the *criticism of literary ideas* perhaps represents the most modern hypostasis of critical consciousness.