THE WORK OF FIRE

Maurice Blanchot

Translated by
Charlotte Mandell

Stanford
University
Press

Stanford
California
1995
§ Literature and the Right to Death

One can certainly write without asking why one writes. As a writer watches his pen form the letters, does he even have a right to lift it and say to it: "Stop! What do you know about yourself? Why are you moving forward? Why can't you see that your ink isn't making any marks, that although you may be moving ahead freely, you're moving through a void, that the reason you never encounter any obstacles is that you never left your starting place? And yet you write—you write on and on, disclosing to me what I dictate to you, revealing to me what I know; as others read, they enrich you with what they take from you and give you what you teach them. Now you have done what you did not do; what you did not write has been written: you are condemned to be indelible."

Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question. This question is not the same as a writer's doubts or scruples. If he happens to ask himself questions as he writes, that is his concern; if he is absorbed by what he is writing and indifferent to the possibility of writing it, if he is not even thinking about anything, that is his right and his good luck. But one thing is still true: as soon as the page has been written, the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing—though he may not have been aware of it—is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work, waiting for a reader to approach—any kind of reader, shallow or profound; this question is addressed to language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading, by language which has become literature.

This concern that literature has with itself may be condemned as an infatuation. It is useless for this concern to speak to literature about its nothingness, its lack of seriousness, its bad faith; this is the very abuse of which it is accused. Literature professes to be important while at the same time considering itself an object of doubt. It confirms itself as it disparages itself. It seeks itself: this is more than it has a right to do, because literature may be one of those things which deserve to be found but not to be sought.

Perhaps literature has no right to consider itself illegitimate. But the question it contains has, properly speaking, nothing to do with its value or its rights. The reason the meaning of this question is so difficult to discover is that the question tends to turn into a prosecution of art and art's capacities and goals. Literature is built on top of its own ruins: this paradox has become a cliché to us. But we must still ask whether the challenge brought against art by the most illustrious works of art in the last thirty years is not based on the redirection, the displacement, of a force laboring in the secrecy of works and loath to emerge into broad daylight, a force the thrust of which was originally quite distinct from any depreciation of literary activity or the literary Thing.

We should point out that as its own negation, literature has never signified the simple denunciation of art or the artist as mystification or deception. Yes, literature is unquestionably illegitimate, there is an underlying deceitfulness in it. But certain people have discovered something beyond this: literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity, it may constitute an extraordinary force, a marvelous force. To make literature become the exposure of this emptiness inside, to make it open up completely to its nothingness, realize its own unreality—this is one of the tasks undertaken by surrealism. Thus we are correct when we recognize surrealism as a powerful negative movement, but no less correct when we attribute to it the greatest creative ambition, because if literature coincides
§ Literature and the Right to Death

One can certainly write without asking why one writes. As a writer watches his pen form the letters, does he even have a right to lift it and say to it: “Stop! What do you know about yourself? Why are you moving forward? Why can’t you see that your ink isn’t making any marks, that although you may be moving ahead freely, you’re moving through a void, that the reason you never encounter any obstacles is that you never left your starting place? And yet you write—you write on and on, disclosing to me what I dictate to you, revealing to me what I know; as others read, they enrich you with what they take from you and give you what you teach them. Now you have done what you did not do; what you did not write has been written: you are condemned to be indelible.”

Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question. This question is not the same as a writer’s doubts or scruples. If he happens to ask himself questions as he writes, that is his concern; if he is absorbed by what he is writing and indifferent to the possibility of writing it, if he is not even thinking about anything, that is his right and his good luck. But one thing is still true: as soon as the page has been written, the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing—though he may not have been aware of it—is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work, waiting for a reader to approach—any kind of reader, shallow or profound; this question is addressed to language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading, by language which has become literature.

This concern that literature has with itself may be condemned as an infatuation. It is useless for this concern to speak to literature about its nothingness, its lack of seriousness, its bad faith; this is the very abuse of which it is accused. Literature professes to be important while at the same time considering itself an object of doubt. It confirms itself as it disparages itself. It seeks itself: this is more than it has a right to do, because literature may be one of those things which deserve to be found but not to be sought.

Perhaps literature has no right to consider itself illegitimate. But the question it contains has, properly speaking, nothing to do with its value or its rights. The reason the meaning of this question is so difficult to discover is that the question tends to turn into a prosecution of art and art’s capacities and goals. Literature is built on top of its own ruins: this paradox has become a cliché to us. But we must still ask whether the challenge brought against art by the most illustrious works of art in the last thirty years is not based on the redirection, the displacement, of a force laboring in the secrecy of works and loath to emerge into broad daylight, a force the thrust of which was originally quite distinct from any deprecation of literary activity or the literary Thing.

We should point out that as its own negation, literature has never signified the simple denunciation of art or the artist as mystification or deception. Yes, literature is unquestionably illegitimate, there is an underlying deceitfulness in it. But certain people have discovered something beyond this: literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity, it may constitute an extraordinary force, a marvelous force. To make literature become the exposure of this emptiness inside, to make it open up completely to its nothingness, realize its own unreality—this is one of the tasks undertaken by surrealism. Thus we are correct when we recognize surrealism as a powerful negative movement, but no less correct when we attribute to it the greatest creative ambition, because if literature coincides
with nothing for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!

It is not a question of abusing literature, but rather of trying to understand it and to see why we can only understand it by disparaging it. It has been noted with amazement that the question "What is literature?" has received only meaningless answers. But what is even stranger is that something about the very form of such a question takes away all its seriousness. People can and do ask, "What is poetry?" "What is art?" and even "What is the novel?" But the literature which is both poem and novel seems to be the element of emptiness present in all these serious things, and to which reflection, with its own gravity, cannot direct itself without losing its seriousness. If reflection, imposing as it is, approaches literature, literature becomes a caustic force, capable of destroying the very capacity in itself and in reflection to be imposing. If reflection withdraws, then literature once again becomes something important, essential, more important than the philosophy, the religion, or the life of the world which it embraces. But if reflection, shocked by this vast power, returns to this force and asks it what it is, it is immediately penetrated by a corrosive, volatile element and can only scorn a Thing so vain, so vague, and so impure, and in this scorn and this vanity be consumed in turn, as the story of Monsieur Teste has so clearly shown us.

It would be a mistake to say that the powerful negative contemporary movements are responsible for this volatizing and volatile force which literature seems to have become. About one hundred fifty years ago, a man who had the highest idea of art that anyone can have—because he saw how art can become religion and religion, art—this man (called Hegel) described all the ways in which someone who has chosen to be a man of letters condemns himself to belong to the "animal kingdom of the mind."* From his very first step, Hegel virtually says, a person who wishes to write is stopped by a contradiction: in order to write, he must have the talent to write. But gifts, in themselves, are nothing. As long as he has not yet sat down at his table and written a work, the writer is not a writer and does not know if he has the capacity to become one. He has no talent until he has written, but he needs talent in order to write.

This difficulty illuminates, from the outset, the anomaly which is the essence of literary activity and which the writer both must and must not overcome. A writer is not an idealistic dreamer, he does not contemplate himself in the intimacy of his beautiful soul, he does not submerge himself in the inner certainty of his talents. He puts his talents to work; that is, he needs the work he produces in order to be conscious of his talents and of himself. The writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing. He exists only as a function of the work; but then how can the work exist? "An individual," says Hegel, "cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the End of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a conscious individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as entirely his own, i.e., as an End."* Now, the same is true for each new work, because everything begins again from nothing. And the same is also true when he creates a work part by part: if he does not see his work before him as a project already completely formed, how can he make it the conscious end of his conscious acts? But if the work is already present in its entirety in his mind and if this presence is the essence of the work (taking the words, for the time being, to be inessential), why would he realize it any further? Either as an interior project it is everything it ever will be, and from that moment the writer knows everything about it that he can learn, and so will leave it to lie there in its twilight.

* In this argument, Hegel is considering human work in general. It should be understood that the remarks which follow are quite remote from the text of the Phenomenology and make no attempt to illuminate it. The text can be read in Jean Hippolyte's translation and pursued further through his important book, Origin and Structure of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of the Spirit.'

with nothing for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!

It is not a question of abusing literature, but rather of trying to understand it and to see why we can only understand it by disparaging it. It has been noted with amazement that the question “What is literature?” has received only meaningless answers. But what is even stranger is that something about the very form of such a question takes away all its seriousness. People can and do ask, “What is poetry?” “What is art?” and even “What is the novel?” But the literature which is both poem and novel seems to be the element of emptiness present in all these serious things, and to which reflection, with its own gravity, cannot direct itself without losing its seriousness. If reflection, imposing as it is, approaches literature, literature becomes a caustic force, capable of destroying the very capacity in itself and in reflection to be imposing. If reflection withdraws, then literature once again becomes something important, essential, more important than the philosophy, the religion, or the life of the world which it embraces. But if reflection, shocked by this vast power, returns to this force and asks it what it is, it is immediately penetrated by a corrosive, volatile element and can only scorn a Thing so vain, so vague, and so impure, and in this scorn and this vanity be consumed in turn, as the story of Monsieur Teste has so clearly shown us.

It would be a mistake to say that the powerful negative contemporary movements are responsible for this volatizing and volatile force which literature seems to have become. About one hundred fifty years ago, a man who had the highest idea of art that anyone can have—because he saw how art can become religion and religion, art—this man (called Hegel) described all the ways in which someone who has chosen to be a man of letters condemns himself to belong to the “animal kingdom of the mind.”* From his very first step, Hegel virtually says, a person who wishes to write is stopped by a contradiction: in order to write, he must have the talent to write. But gifts, in themselves, are nothing. As long as he has not yet sat down at his table and written a work, the writer is not a writer and does not know if he has the capacity to become one. He has no talent until he has written, but he needs talent in order to write.

This difficulty illuminates, from the outset, the anomaly which is the essence of literary activity and which the writer both must and must not overcome. A writer is not an idealistic dreamer, he does not contemplate himself in the intimacy of his beautiful soul, he does not submerge himself in the inner certainty of his talents. He puts his talents to work; that is, he needs the work he produces in order to be conscious of his talents and of himself. The writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing. He exists only as a function of the work; but then how can the work exist? “An individual,” says Hegel, “cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the End of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a conscious individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as entirely his own, i.e., as an End.”* Now, the same is true for each new work, because everything begins again from nothing. And the same is also true when he creates a work part by part: if he does not see his work before him as a project already completely formed, how can he make it the conscious end of his conscious acts? But if the work is already present in its entirety in his mind and if this presence is the essence of the work (taking the words, for the time being, to be inessential), why would he realize it any further? Either as an interior project it is everything it ever will be, and from that moment the writer knows everything about it that he can learn, and so will leave it to lie there in its twilight,

* In this argument, Hegel is considering human work in general. It should be understood that the remarks which follow are quite remote from the text of the Phenomenology and make no attempt to illuminate it. The text can be read in Jean Hippolyte’s translation and pursued further through his important book, Origin and Structure of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology of the Spirit.’

without translating it into words, without writing it—but then he won’t ever write; and he won’t be a writer. Or, realizing that the work cannot be planned, but only carried out, that it has value, truth, and reality only through the words which unfold it in time and inscribe it in space, he will begin to write, but starting from nothing and with nothing in mind—like a nothingness working in nothingness, to borrow an expression of Hegel’s.

In fact, this problem could never be overcome if the person writing expected its solution to give him the right to begin writing. "For that very reason," Hegel remarks, "he has to start immediately, and, whatever the circumstances, without further scruples about beginning, means, or End, proceed to action." This way, he can break the circle, because in his eyes the circumstances under which he begins to write become the same thing as his talent, and the interest he takes in writing, and the movement which carries him forward, induce him to recognize these circumstances as his own, to see his own goal in them. Valéry often reminded us that his best works were created for a chance commission and were not born of personal necessity. But what did he find so remarkable about that? If he had set to work on Eupalinos of his own accord, what reasons would he have had for doing it? That he had held a piece of shell in his hand? Or that opening a dictionary one morning, he happened to read the name Eupalinos in La Grande Encyclopédie? Or that he wanted to try dialogue as a form and happened to have on hand a piece of paper that lent itself to that form? One can imagine the most trivial circumstance as the starting point of a great work; nothing is compromised by that triviality: the act by which the author makes it into a crucial circumstance is enough to incorporate it into his genius and his work. In this sense, the publication Architectures, which commissioned Eupalinos from Valéry, was really the form in which he originally had the talent to write it: that commission was the beginning of that talent, was that talent itself, but we must also add that that commission only became real, only became a true project through Valéry’s existence, his talent, his conversations in the world, and the interest he had already shown in this sort of subject. Every work is an occasional work: this simply means that each work has a beginning, that it begins at a certain moment in time and that that moment in time is part of the work, since without it the work would have been only an insurmountable problem, nothing more than the impossibility of writing it.

Let us suppose that the work has been written: with it the writer is born. Before, there was no one to write it; starting from the book, an author exists and merges with his book. When Kafka chances to write the sentence "He was looking out the window," he is—as he says—in a state of inspiration such that the sentence is already perfect. The point is that he is the author of it—or rather that, because of it, he is an author: it is the source of his existence, he has made it and it makes him, it is himself and he is completely what it is. This is the reason for his joy, his pure and perfect joy. Whatever he might write, "the sentence is already perfect." This is the reason for his joy, his pure and perfect joy. This is the strange and profound certainty which art makes into a goal for itself. What is written is neither well nor badly written, neither important nor frivolous, memorable nor forgettable: it is the perfect act through which what was nothing when it was inside emerges into the monumental reality of the outside as something which is necessarily true, as a translation which is necessarily faithful, since the person it translates exists only through it and in it. One could say that this certainty is in some sense the writer’s inner paradise and that automatic writing has been only one way of making this golden age real—what Hegel calls the pure joy of passing from the night of possibility into the daytime of presence—or again, the certainty that what bursts into the light is none other than what was sleeping in the night. But what is the result of this? The writer who is completely gathered up and enclosed in the sentence “He was looking out the window” apparently cannot be asked to justify this sentence, since for him nothing else exists. But at least the sentence exists, and if it really exists to the point of making the person who wrote it a writer, this is because it is not just his sentence, but a
without translating it into words, without writing it—but then he won’t ever write; and he won’t be a writer. Or, realizing that the work cannot be planned, but only carried out, that it has value, truth, and reality only through the words which unfold it in time and inscribe it in space, he will begin to write, but starting from nothing and with nothing in mind—like a nothingness working in nothingness, to borrow an expression of Hegel’s.

In fact, this problem could never be overcome if the person writing expected its solution to give him the right to begin writing. “For that very reason,” Hegel remarks, “he has to start immediately, and, whatever the circumstances, without further scruples about beginning, means, or End, proceed to action.” This way, he can break the circle, because in his eyes the circumstances under which he begins to write become the same thing as his talent, and the interest he takes in writing, and the movement which carries him forward, induce him to recognize these circumstances as his own, to see his own goal in them. Valéry often reminded us that his best works were created for a chance commission and were not born of personal necessity. But what did he find so remarkable about that? If he had set to work on Eupalinos of his own accord, what reasons would he have had for doing it? That he had held a piece of shell in his hand? Or that opening a dictionary one morning, he happened to read the name Eupalinos in La Grande Encyclopédie? Or that he wanted to try dialogue as a form and happened to have on hand a piece of paper that lent itself to that form? One can imagine the most trivial circumstance as the starting point of a great work; nothing is compromised by that triviality: the act by which the author makes it into a crucial circumstance is enough to incorporate it into his genius and his work. In this sense, the publication Architectures, which commissioned Eupalinos from Valéry, was really the form in which he originally had the talent to write it: that commission was the beginning of that talent, was that talent itself, but we must also add that that commission only became real, only became a true project through Valéry’s existence, his talent, his conversations in the world, and the interest he had already shown in this sort of subject. Every work is an occasional work: this simply means that each work has a beginning, that it begins at a certain moment in time and that that moment in time is part of the work, since without it the work would have been only an insurmountable problem, nothing more than the impossibility of writing it.

Let us suppose that the work has been written: with it the writer is born. Before, there was no one to write it; starting from the book, an author exists and merges with his book. When Kafka chances to write the sentence “He was looking out the window,” he is—as he says—in a state of inspiration such that the sentence is already perfect. The point is that he is the author of it—or rather that, because of it, he is an author: it is the source of his existence, he has made it and it makes him, it is himself and he is completely what it is. This is the reason for his joy, his pure and perfect joy. Whatever he might write, “the sentence is already perfect.” This is the reason for his existence, his pure and perfect joy. This is the strange and profound certainty which art makes into a goal for itself. What is written is neither well nor badly written, neither important nor frivolous, memorable nor forgettable: it is the perfect act through which what was nothing when it was inside emerges into the monumental reality of the outside as something which is necessarily true, as a translation which is necessarily faithful, since the person it translates exists only through it and in it. One could say that this certainty is in some sense the writer’s inner paradise and that automatic writing has been only one way of making this golden age real—what Hegel calls the pure joy of passing from the night of possibility into the daytime of presence—or again, the certainty that what bursts into the light is none other than what was sleeping in the night. But what is the result of this? The writer who is completely gathered up and enclosed in the sentence “He was looking out the window” apparently cannot be asked to justify this sentence, since for him nothing else exists. But at least the sentence exists, and if it really exists to the point of making the person who wrote it a writer, this is because it is not just his sentence, but a
sentence that belongs to other people, people who can read it—it is a universal sentence.

At this point, a disconcerting ordeal begins. The author sees other people taking an interest in his work, but the interest they take in it is different from the interest that made it a pure expression of himself, and that different interest changes the work, transforms it into something different, something in which he does not recognize the original perfection. For him the work has disappeared, it has become a work belonging to other people, a work which includes them and does not include him, a book which derives its value from other books, which is original if it does not resemble them, which is understood because it is a reflection of them. Now the writer cannot disregard this new stage. As we have seen, he exists only in his work, but the work exists only when it has become this public, alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities. So he really is inside the work, but the work itself is disappearing. This is a particularly critical moment in the experiment. All sorts of interpretations come into play in getting beyond it. The writer, for example, would like to protect the perfection of the written Thing by keeping it as far away from life outside as possible. The work is what he created, not the book that is being bought, read, ground up, and praised or demolished in the marketplace of the world. But then where does the work begin, where does it end? At what moment does it come into existence? Why make it public if the splendor of the pure self must be preserved in the work, why take it outside, why realize it in words which belong to everyone? Why not withdraw into an enclosed and secret intimacy without producing anything but an empty object and a dying echo? Another solution—the writer himself agrees to do away with himself: the only one who matters in the work is the person who reads it. The reader makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is its real author, he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing; and so the author now has only one goal, to write for that reader and to merge with him. A hopeless endeavor. Because the reader has no use for a work written for him, what he wants is precisely an alien work in which he can discover something unknown, a different reality, a separate mind capable of transforming him and which he can transform into himself. An author who is writing specifically for a public is not really writing; it is the public that is writing, and for this reason the public can no longer be a reader; reading only appears to exist, actually it is nothing. This is why works created to be read are meaningless: no one reads them. This is why it is dangerous to write for other people, in order to evoke the speech of others and reveal them to themselves: the fact is that other people do not want to hear their own voices; they want to hear someone else's voice, a voice that is real, profound, troubling like the truth.

A writer cannot withdraw into himself, for he would then have to give up writing. As he writes, he cannot sacrifice the pure night of his own possibilities, because his work is alive only if that night—and no other—becomes day, if what is most singular about him and farthest removed from existence as already revealed now reveals itself within shared existence. It is true that the writer can try to justify himself by setting himself the task of writing—the simple operation of writing, made conscious of itself quite independently of its results. As we know, this was Valéry's way of saving himself. Let us accept this. Let us accept that a writer may concern himself with art as pure technique, with technique as nothing more than the search for the means by which what was previously not written comes to be written. But if the experiment is to be a valid one, it cannot separate the operation from its results, and the results are never stable or definitive, but infinitely varied and meshed with a future which cannot be grasped. A writer who claims he is concerned only with how the work comes into being sees his concern get sucked into the world, lose itself in the whole of history; because the work is also made outside of him, and all the rigor he put into the consciousness of his deliberate actions, his careful rhetoric, is soon absorbed into the workings of a vital contingency which he cannot control or even observe. Yet his experiment is not worthless: in writing, he has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing. The work disappears, but the
sentence that belongs to other people, people who can read it—it is a universal sentence.

At this point, a disconcerting ordeal begins. The author sees other people taking an interest in his work, but the interest they take in it is different from the interest that made it a pure expression of himself, and that different interest changes the work, transforms it into something different, something in which he does not recognize the original perfection. For him the work has disappeared, it has become a work belonging to other people, a work which includes them and does not include him, a book which derives its value from other books, which is original if it does not resemble them, which is understood because it is a reflection of them. Now the writer cannot disregard this new stage. As we have seen, he exists only in his work, but the work exists only when it has become this public, alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities. So he really is inside the work, but the work itself is disappearing. This is a particularly critical moment in the experiment. All sorts of interpretations come into play in getting beyond it. The writer, for example, would like to protect the perfection of the written Thing by keeping it as far away from life outside as possible. The work is what he created, not the book that is being bought, read, ground up, and praised or demolished in the marketplace of the world. But then where does the work begin, where does it end? At what moment does it come into existence? Why make it public if the splendor of the pure self must be preserved in the work, why take it outside, why realize it in words which belong to everyone? Why not withdraw into an enclosed and secret intimacy without producing anything but an empty object and a dying echo? Another solution—the writer himself agrees to do away with himself: the only one who matters in the work is the person who reads it. The reader makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is its real author, he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing; and so the author now has only one goal, to write for that reader and to merge with him. A hopeless endeavor. Because the reader has no use for a work written for him, what he wants is precisely an alien work in which he can discover something unknown, a different reality, a separate mind capable of transforming him and which he can transform into himself. An author who is writing specifically for a public is not really writing; it is the public that is writing, and for this reason the public can no longer be a reader; reading only appears to exist, actually it is nothing. This is why works created to be read are meaningless: no one reads them. This is why it is dangerous to write for other people, in order to evoke the speech of others and reveal them to themselves: the fact is that other people do not want to hear their own voices; they want to hear someone else's voice, a voice that is real, profound, troubling like the truth.

A writer cannot withdraw into himself, for he would then have to give up writing. As he writes, he cannot sacrifice the pure night of his own possibilities, because his work is alive only if that night—and no other—becomes day; if what is most singular about him and farthest removed from existence as already revealed now reveals itself within shared existence. It is true that the writer can try to justify himself by setting himself the task of writing—the simple operation of writing, made conscious of itself quite independently of its results. As we know, this was Valéry's way of saving himself. Let us accept this. Let us accept that a writer may concern himself with art as pure technique, with technique as nothing more than the search for the means by which what was previously not written comes to be written. But if the experiment is to be a valid one, it cannot separate the operation from its results, and the results are never stable or definitive, but infinitely varied and meshed with a future which cannot be grasped. A writer who claims he is concerned only with how the work comes into being seeks his concern to be sucked into the world, lose itself in the whole of history; because the work is also made outside of him, and all the rigor he put into the consciousness of his deliberate actions, his careful rhetoric, is soon absorbed into the workings of a vital contingency which he cannot control or even observe. Yet his experiment is not worthless: in writing, he has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing. The work disappears, but the
fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing, the movement which allows the work to be realized as it enters the stream of history, to be realized as it disappears. In this experiment, the writer's real goal is no longer the ephemeral work but something beyond that work: the truth of the work, where the individual who writes—a force of creative negation—seems to join with the work in motion through which this force of negation and surpassing asserts itself.

This new notion, which Hegel calls the Thing Itself, plays a vital role in the literary undertaking. No matter that it has so many different meanings: it is the art which is above the work, the ideal that the work seeks to represent, the World as it is sketched out in the work, the values at stake in the creative effort, the authenticity of this effort; it is everything which, above the work that is constantly being dissolved in things, maintains the model, the essence, and the spiritual truth of that work just as the writer's freedom wanted to manifest it and can recognize it as its own. The goal is not what the writer makes but the truth of what he makes. As far as this goes, he deserves to be called an honest, disinterested conscience—the honest man. But here we run into trouble: as soon as honesty comes into play in literature, imposture is already present. Here bad faith is truth, and the greater the pretension to morality and seriousness, the more surely will mystification and deceit triumph. Yes, literature is undoubtedly the world of values, since above the mediocrity of the finished works everything they lack keeps appearing as their own truth. But what is the result of this? A perpetual enticement, an extraordinary game of hide-and-seek in which the writer claims as an excuse that what he has in mind is not the ephemeral work but the spirit of that work and of every work—no matter what he does, no matter what he has not been able to do, he adapts himself to it, and his honest conscience derives knowledge and glory from it. Let us listen to that honest conscience; we are familiar with it because it is working in all of us. When the work has failed, this conscience is not troubled: it says to itself, "Now it has been fully completed, for failure is its essence; its disappearance constitutes its realization," and the conscience is happy with this; lack of success delights it. But what if the book does not even manage to be born, what if it remains a pure nothing? Well, this is still better: silence and nothingness are the essence of literature, "the Thing Itself." It is true: the writer is willing to put the highest value on the meaning his work has for him alone. Then it does not matter whether the work is good or bad, famous or forgotten. If circumstances neglect it, he congratulates himself, since he wrote it only to negate circumstances. But when a book that comes into being by chance, produced in a moment of idleness and lassitude, without value or significance, is suddenly made into a masterpiece by circumstantial events, what author is not going to take credit for the glory himself, in his heart of hearts, what author is not going to see his own worth in that glory, and his own work in that gift of fortune, the working of his mind in providential harmony with his time?

A writer in his own first dupe, and at the very moment he fools other people he is also fooling himself. Listen to him again: now he states that his function is to write for others, that as he writes he has nothing in mind but the reader's interest. He says this and he believes it. But it is not true at all. Because if he were not attentive first and foremost to what he is doing, if he were not concerned with literature as his own action, he could not even write: he would not be the one who was writing—the one writing would be no one. This is why it is futile for him to take the seriousness of an ideal as his guarantee, futile for him to claim to have stable values: this seriousness is not his own seriousness and can never settle definitively where he thinks he is. For example: he writes novels, and these novels imply certain political statements, so that he seems to side with a certain Cause. Other people, people who directly support the Cause, are then inclined to recognize him as one of themselves, to see his work as proof that the Cause is really his cause, but as soon as they make this claim, as soon as they try to become involved in this activity and take it over, they realize that the writer is not on their side, that he is only on his own side, that what interests him about the Cause is the operation he himself has carried out—and they are puzzled. It is easy to understand why
fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing, the movement which allows the work to be realized as it enters the stream of history, to be realized as it disappears. In this experiment, the writer's real goal is no longer the ephemeral work but something beyond that work: the truth of the work, where the individual who writes—a force of creative negation—seems to join with the work in motion through which this force of negation and surpassing asserts itself.

This new notion, which Hegel calls the Thing Itself, plays a vital role in the literary undertaking. No matter that it has so many different meanings: it is the art which is above the work, the ideal that the work seeks to represent, the World as it is sketched out in the work, the values at stake in the creative effort, the authenticity of this effort; it is everything which, above the work that is constantly being dissolved in things, maintains the model, the essence, and the spiritual truth of that work just as the writer's freedom wanted to manifest it and can recognize it as its own. The goal is not what the writer makes but the truth of what he makes. As far as this goes, he deserves to be called an honest, disinterested conscience—the honest man. But here we run into trouble: as soon as honesty comes into play in literature, imposture is already present. Here bad faith is truth, and the greater the pretension to morality and seriousness, the more surely will mystification and deceit triumph. Yes, literature is undoubtedly the world of values, since above the mediocrity of the finished works everything they lack keeps appearing as their own truth. But what if the book does not even manage to be born, what if it remains a pure nothing? Well, this is still better: silence and nothingness are the essence of literature, "the Thing Itself." It is true: the writer is willing to put the highest value on the meaning his work has for him alone. Then it does not matter whether the work is good or bad, famous or forgotten. If circumstances neglect it, he congratulates himself, since he wrote it only to negate circumstances. But when a book that comes into being by chance, produced in a moment of idleness and lassitude, without value or significance, is suddenly made into a masterpiece by circumstantial events, what author is not going to take credit for the glory himself, in his heart of hearts, what author is not going to see his own worth in that glory, and his own work in that gift of fortune, the working of his mind in providential harmony with his time?

A writer in his own first dupe, and at the very moment he fools other people he is also fooling himself. Listen to him again: now he states that his function is to write for others, that as he writes he has nothing in mind but the reader's interest. He says this and he believes it. But it is not true at all. Because if he were not attentive first and foremost to what he is doing, if he were not concerned with literature as his own action, he could not even write: he would not be the one who was writing—the one writing would be no one. This is why it is futile for him to take the seriousness of an ideal as his guarantee, futile for him to claim to have stable values: this seriousness is not his own seriousness and can never settle definitively where he thinks he is. For example: he writes novels, and these novels imply certain political statements, so that he seems to side with a certain Cause. Other people, people who directly support the Cause, are then inclined to recognize him as one of themselves, to see his work as proof that the Cause is really his cause, but as soon as they try to take over this activity and become involved in this activity and take it over, they realize that the writer is not on their side, that he is only on his own side, that what interests him about the Cause is the operation he himself has carried out—and they are puzzled. It is easy to understand why
men who have committed themselves to a party, who have made a
decision, distrust writers who share their views; because these
writers have also committed themselves to literature, and in the
final analysis literature, by its very activity, denies the substance of
what it represents. This is its law and its truth. If it renounces this
in order to attach itself permanently to a truth outside itself, it
ceases to be a literature and the writer who still claims he is a writer
enters into another aspect of bad faith. Then must a writer refuse to
take an interest in anything, must he turn his face to the wall? The
problem is that if he does this, his equivocation is just as great. First
of all, looking at the wall is also turning toward the world; one is
making the wall into the world. When a writer sinks into the pure
intimacy of a work which is no one's business but his own, it may
seem to other people—other writers and people involved in other
activities—that at least they have been left at peace in their Thing
and their own work. But not at all. The work created by this
solitary person and enclosed in solitude contains within itself a
point of view which concerns everyone, implicitly passing judgment
on other works, on the problems of the times, becoming the
accomplice of whatever it neglects, the enemy of whatever it aban-
dons, and its indifference mingles hypocratically with everyone's
passion.

What is striking is that in literature, deceit and mystification not
only are inevitable but constitute the writer's honesty, whatever
hope and truth are in him. Nowadays people often talk about the
sickness of words, and we even become irritated with those who
talk about it, and suspect them of making words sick so they can
talk about it. This could be the case. The trouble is that this
sickness is also the words' health. They may be torn apart by
equivocation, but this equivocation is a good thing—without it
there would be no dialogue. They may be falsified by misunder-
standing—but this misunderstanding is the possibility of our un-
derstanding. They may be imbued with emptiness—but this emp-
tiness is their very meaning. Naturally, a writer can always make it
his ideal to call a cat a cat. But what he cannot manage to do is then
believe that he is on the way to health and sincerity. On the
contrary, he is causing more mystification than ever, because the cat
is not a cat, and anyone who claims that it is has nothing in mind
but this hypocrical violence: Rolet is a rascal.*

There are many reasons for this imposture. We have just been
discussing the first reason: literature is made up of different stages
which are distinct from one another and in opposition to one
another. Honesty, which is analytical because it tries to see clearly,
separates these stages. Under the eyes of honesty pass in succession
the author, the work, and the reader; in succession the art of
writing, the thing written, and the truth of that thing or the Thing
Itself; still in succession, the writer without a name, pure absence of
himself, pure idleness, then the writer who is work, who is the
action of a creation indifferent to what it is creating, then the writer
who is the result of this work and is worth something because of
this result and not because of the work, as real as the created thing is
real, then the writer who is no longer affirmed by this result but
denied by it, who saves the ephemeral work by saving its ideal, the
truth of the work, etc. The writer is not simply one of these stages
to the exclusion of the others, nor is he even all of them put
together in their unimportant succession, but the action which
brings them together and unifies them. As a result, when the
honest conscience judges the writer by immobilizing him in one of
these forms, when, for instance, it attempts to condemn the work
because it is a failure, the writer's other honesty protests in the
name of the other stages, in the name of the purity of art, which
sees its own triumph in the failure—and likewise, every time a
writer is challenged under one of his aspects, he has no choice but
to present himself as someone else, and when addressed as the
author of a beautiful work, disown that work, and when admired as
an inspiration and a genius, see in himself only application and
hard work, and when read by everyone, say: "Who can read me? I
haven't written anything." This shifting on the part of the writer
makes him into someone who is perpetually absent, an irrespon-

* Blanchot is referring to a remark made by Nicolas Boileau (1637-1711) in his
first Satire: "J'appelle un chat un chat et Rolet un fripon" ("I call a cat a cat and
Rolet a rascal"). Rolet was a notorious figure of the time.—Trans.
men who have committed themselves to a party, who have made a
decision, distrust writers who share their views; because these
writers have also committed themselves to literature, and in the
final analysis literature, by its very activity, denies the substance of
what it represents. This is its law and its truth. If it renounces this
in order to attach itself permanently to a truth outside itself, it
ceases to be a literature and the writer who still claims he is a writer
crosses into another aspect of bad faith. Then must a writer refuse to
take an interest in anything, must he turn his face to the wall? The
problem is that if he does this, his equivocation is just as great. First
of all, looking at the wall is also turning toward the world; one is
making the wall into the world. When a writer sinks into the pure
intimacy of a work which is no one's business but his own, it may
seem to other people—other writers and people involved in other
activities—that at least they have been left at peace in their Thing
and their own work. But not at all. The work created by this
solitary person and enclosed in solitude contains within itself a
point of view which concerns everyone, implicitly passing judgment
on other works, on the problems of the times, becoming the
accomplice of whatever it neglects, the enemy of whatever it aban-
dons, and its indifference mingles hypocritically with everyone's
passion.

What is striking is that in literature, deceit and mystification not
only are inevitable but constitute the writer's honesty, whatever
hope and truth are in him. Nowadays people often talk about the
sickness of words, and we even become irritated with those who
talk about it, and suspect them of making words sick so they can
talk about it. This could be the case. The trouble is that this
sickness is also the words' health. They may be torn apart by
equivocation, but this equivocation is a good thing—without it
there would be no dialogue. They may be falsified by misunder-
standing—but this misunderstanding is the possibility of our un-
derstanding. They may be imbued with emptiness—but this emp-
tiness is their very meaning. Naturally, a writer can always make it
his ideal to call a cat a cat. But what he cannot manage to do is then
believe that he is on the way to health and sincerity. On the
contrary, he is causing more mystification than ever, because the cat
is not a cat, and anyone who claims that it is has nothing in mind
but this hypocritical violence: Rolet is a rascal.*

There are many reasons for this imposture. We have just been
discussing the first reason: literature is made up of different stages
which are distinct from one another and in opposition to one
another. Honesty, which is analytical because it tries to see clearly,
separates these stages. Under the eyes of honesty pass in succession
the author, the work, and the reader; in succession the art of
writing, the thing written, and the truth of that thing or the Thing
Itself; still in succession, the writer without a name, pure absence of
himself, pure idleness, then the writer who is work, who is the
action of a creation indifferent to what it is creating, then the writer
who is the result of this work and is worth something because of
this result and not because of the work, as real as the created thing is
real, then the writer who is no longer affirmed by this result but
denied by it, who saves the ephemeral work by saving its ideal, the
truth of the work, etc. The writer is not simply one of these stages
to the exclusion of the others, nor is he even all of them put

* Blanchot is referring to a remark made by Nicolas Boileau (1637–1711) in his
first Satire: "J'appelle un chat un chat et Rolet un fripon" ("I call a cat a cat and
Rolet a rascal"). Rolet was a notorious figure of the time.—Trans.
ble character without a conscience, but this shifting also forms the extent of his presence, of his risks and responsibility.

The trouble is that the writer is not only several people in one, but each stage of himself denies all the others, demands everything for itself alone, and does not tolerate any conciliation or compromise. The writer must respond to several absolute and absolutely different commands at once, and his morality is made up of the confrontation and opposition of implacably hostile rules.

One rule says to him: "You will not write, you will remain nothingness, you will keep silent, you will not know words."

The other rule says: "Know nothing but words."

"Write to say nothing."

"Write to say something."

"No works; rather, the experience of yourself, the knowledge of what is unknown to you."

"A work! A real work, recognized by other people and important to other people."

"Obliterate the reader."

"Obliterate yourself before the reader."

"Write in order to be true."

"Write for the sake of truth."

"Then be a lie, because to write with truth in mind is to write what is not yet true and perhaps never will be true."

"It doesn't matter, write in order to act."

"Write— you who are afraid to act."

"Let freedom speak in you."

"Oh! do not let freedom become a word in you."

Which law should be obeyed? Which voice should be listened to? But the writer must listen to them all! What confusion! Isn't clarity his law? Yes, clarity, too. He must therefore oppose himself, deny himself even as he affirms himself, look for the deepness of the night in the facility of the day, look in the shadows which never begin, to find the sure light which cannot end. He must save the world and be the abyss, justify existence and allow what does not exist to speak; he must be at the end of all eras in the universal plenitude, and he is the origin, the birth of what does nothing but come into being. Is he all that? Literature is all that, in him. But isn't all that what literature would like to be, what in reality it is not? In that case, literature is nothing. But is it nothing?

Literature is not nothing. People who are contemptuous of literature are mistaken in thinking they are condemning it by saying it is nothing. "All that is only literature." This is how people create an opposition between action, which is a concrete initiative in the world, and the written word, which is supposed to be a passive expression on the surface of the world; people who are in favor of action reject literature, which does not act, and those in search of passion become writers so as not to act. But this is to condemn and to love in an abusive way. If we see work as the force of history, the force that transforms man while it transforms the world, then a writer's activity must be recognized as the highest form of work. When a man works, what does he do? He produces a object. That object is the realization of a plan which was unreal before then: it is the affirmation of a reality different from the elements which constitute it and it is the future of new objects, to the extent that it becomes a tool capable of creating other objects. For example, my project might be to get warm. As long as this project is only a desire, I can turn it over every possible way and still it will not make me warm. But now I build a stove: the stove transforms the empty ideal which was my desire into something real; it affirms the presence in the world of something which was not there before, and in so doing, denies something which was there before; before, I had in front of me stones and cast iron; now I no longer have either stones or cast iron, but instead the product of the transformation of these elements—that is, their denial and destruction—by work. Because of this object, the world is now different. All the more different because this stove will allow me to make other objects, which will in turn deny the former condition of the world and prepare its future. These objects, which I have produced by changing the states of things, will in turn change me. The idea of heat is nothing, but actual heat will make my life a different kind of life, and every new thing I am able to do from now on because of this heat will also make me someone different. Thus is history
ble character without a conscience, but this shifting also forms the extent of his presence, of his risks and responsibility.

The trouble is that the writer is not only several people in one, but each stage of himself denies all the others, demands everything for itself alone, and does not tolerate any conciliation or compromise. The writer must respond to several absolute and absolutely different commands at once, and his morality is made up of the confrontation and opposition of implacably hostile rules.

One rule says to him: "You will not write, you will remain nothingness, you will keep silent, you will not know words."

The other rule says: "Know nothing but words."

"Write to say nothing."

"Write to say something."

"No works; rather, the experience of yourself, the knowledge of what is unknown to you."

"A work! A real work, recognized by other people and important to other people."

"Obliterate the reader."

"Obliterate yourself before the reader."

"Write in order to be true."

"Write for the sake of truth."

"Then be a lie, because to write with truth in mind is to write what is not yet true and perhaps never will be true."

"It doesn't matter, write in order to act."

"Write—you who are afraid to act."

"Let freedom speak in you."

"Oh! do not let freedom become a word in you."

Which law should be obeyed? Which voice should be listened to? But the writer must listen to them all! What confusion! Isn't clarity his law? Yes, clarity, too. He must therefore oppose himself, deny himself even as he affirms himself, look for the deepness of the night in the facility of the day, look in the shadows which never begin, to find the sure light which cannot end. He must save the world and be the abyss, justify existence and allow what does not exist to speak; he must be at the end of all eras in the universal plenitude, and he is the origin, the birth of what does nothing but come into being. Is he all that? Literature is all that, in him. But isn't all that what literature would like to be, what in reality it is not? In that case, literature is nothing. But is it nothing?

Literature is not nothing. People who are contemptuous of literature are mistaken in thinking they are condemning it by saying it is nothing. "All that is only literature." This is how people create an opposition between action, which is a concrete initiative in the world, and the written word, which is supposed to be a passive expression on the surface of the world; people who are in favor of action reject literature, which does not act, and those in search of passion become writers so as not to act. But this is to condemn and to love in an abusive way. If we see work as the force of history, the force that transforms man while it transforms the world, then a writer's activity must be recognized as the highest form of work. When a man works, what does he do? He produces an object. That object is the realization of a plan which was unreal before then: it is the affirmation of a reality different from the elements which constitute it and it is the future of new objects, to the extent that it becomes a tool capable of creating other objects. For example, my project might be to get warm. As long as this project is only a desire, I can turn it over every possible way and still it will not make me warm. But now I build a stove: the stove transforms the empty ideal which was my desire into something real; it affirms the presence in the world of something which was not there before, and in so doing, denies something which was there before; before, I had in front of me stones and cast iron; now I no longer have either stones or cast iron, but instead the product of the transformation of these elements—that is, their denial and destruction—by work. Because of this object, the world is now different. All the more different because this stove will allow me to make other objects, which will in turn deny the former condition of the world and prepare its future. These objects, which I have produced by changing the states of things, will in turn change me. The idea of heat is nothing, but actual heat will make my life a different kind of life, and every new thing I am able to do from now on because of this heat will also make me someone different. Thus is history
formed, say Hegel and Marx—by work which realizes being in denying it, and reveals it at the end of the negation.*

But what is a writer doing when he writes? Everything a man does when he works, but to an outstanding degree. The writer, too, produces something—a work in the highest sense of the word. He produces this work by transforming natural and human realities. When he writes, his starting point is a certain state of language, a certain form of culture, certain books, and also certain objective elements—ink, paper, printing presses. In order to write, he must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form, denying books as he forms a book out of what other books are not. This new book is certainly a reality: it can be seen, touched, even read. In any case, it is not nothing. Before I wrote it, I had an idea of it, at least I had the project of writing it, but I believe there is the same difference between that idea and the volume in which it is realized as between the desire for heat and the stove which makes me warm. For me, the written volume is an extraordinary, unforeseeable innovation—such that it is impossible for me to conceive what it is capable of being without writing it. This is why it seems to me to be an experiment whose effects I cannot grasp, no matter how consciously they were produced, and in the face of which I shall be unable to remain the same, for this reason: in the presence of something other, I become other: But there is an even more decisive reason: this other thing—the book—of which I had only an idea and which I could not possibly have known in advance, is precisely myself become other.

The book, the written thing, enters the world and carries out its work of transformation and negation. It, too, is the future of many other things, and not only books: by the projects which it can give rise to, by the undertakings it encourages, by the totality of the world of which it is a modified reflection, it is an infinite source of new realities, and because of these new realities existence will be something it was not before.

* Alexandre Kojève offers this interpretation of Hegel in his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (Readings on The Phenomenology of the Spirit, selected and published by Raymond Queneau).
formed, say Hegel and Marx—by work which realizes being in denying it, and reveals it at the end of the negation.*

But what is a writer doing when he writes? Everything a man does when he works, but to an outstanding degree. The writer, too, produces something—a work in the highest sense of the word. He produces this work by transforming natural and human realities. When he writes, his starting point is a certain state of language, a certain form of culture, certain books, and also certain objective elements—ink, paper, printing presses. In order to write, he must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form, denying books as he forms a book out of what other books are not. This new book is certainly a reality: it can be seen, touched, even read. In any case, it is not nothing. Before I wrote it, I had an idea of it, at least I had the project of writing it, but I believe there is the same difference between that idea and the volume in which it is realized as between the desire for heat and the stove which makes me warm. For me, the written volume is an extraordinary, unforeseeable innovation—such that it is impossible for me to conceive what it is capable of being without writing it. This is why it seems to me to be an experiment whose effects I cannot grasp, no matter how consciously they were produced, and in the face of which I shall be unable to remain the same, for this reason: in the presence of something other, I become other: But there is an even more decisive reason: this other thing—the book—of which I had only an idea and which I could not possibly have known in advance, is precisely myself become other.

The book, the written thing, enters the world and carries out its work of transformation and negation. It, too, is the future of many other things, and not only books: by the projects which it can give rise to, by the undertakings it encourages, by the totality of the world of which it is a modified reflection, it is an infinite source of new realities, and because of these new realities existence will be something it was not before.

* Alexandre Kojève offers this interpretation of Hegel in his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (Readings on The Phenomenology of the Spirit, selected and published by Raymond Queneau).
things in the process of time into an ideal above time, empty and inaccessible.

A writer's influence is linked to this privilege of being master of everything. But he is only master of everything, he possesses only the infinite; he lacks the finite, limit escapes him. Now, one cannot act in the infinite, one cannot accomplish anything in the unlimited, so that if a writer acts in quite a real way as he produces this real thing which is called a book, he is also discrediting all action by this action, because he is substituting for the world of determined things and defined work a world in which everything is instantly given and there is nothing left to do but read it and enjoy it.

In general, the writer seems to be subjected to a state of inactivity because he is the master of the imaginary, and those who follow him into the realm of the imaginary lose sight of the problems of their true lives. But the danger he represents is much more serious. The truth is that he ruins action, not because he deals with what is unreal but because he makes all of reality available to us. Unreality begins with the whole. The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole. That is why it is not in the world, because it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins, for when literary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing.

Certainly that literature which is said to be "purely imaginative" has its dangers. First of all, it is not pure imagination. It believes that it stands apart from everyday realities and actual events, but the truth is that it has stepped aside from them; it is that distance, that remove from the everyday which necessarily takes the everyday into consideration and describes it as separateness, as pure strangeness. What is more, it makes this distance into an absolute value, and then this separateness seems to be a source of general understanding, the capacity to grasp everything and attain everything immediately, for those who submit to its enchantment enough to emerge from both their life, which is nothing but limited understanding, and time, which is nothing but a narrow perspective. All this is the lie of a fiction. But this kind of literature has on its side the fact that it is not trying to deceive us: it presents itself as imaginary; it puts to sleep only those who want to go to sleep.

What is far more deceitful is the literature of action. It calls on people to do something. But if it wants to remain authentic literature, it must base its representation of this "something to do," this predetermined and specific goal, on a world where such an action turns back into the unreality of an abstract and absolute value. "Something to do," as it may be expressed in a work of literature, is never more than "everything remains to be done," whether it presents itself as this "everything," that is, as an absolute value, or whether it needs this "everything," into which it vanishes, to justify itself and prove that it has merit. The language of a writer, even if he is a revolutionary, is not the language of command. It does not command, it presents; and it does not present by causing whatever it portrays to be present, but by portraying it behind everything, as the meaning and the absence of this everything. The result is either that the appeal of the author to the reader is only an empty appeal, and expresses only the effort which a man cut off from the world makes to reenter the world, as he stands discreetly at its periphery—or that the "something to do," which can be recovered only by starting from absolute values, appears to the reader precisely as that which cannot be done or as that which requires neither work nor action in order to be done.

As we know, a writer's main temptations are called stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. These are all ways of thinking that a writer adopts for reasons he believes he has thought out carefully, but which only literature has thought out in him. A stoic: he is the man of the universe, which itself exists only on paper, and, a prisoner or a poor man, he endures his condition stoically because he can write and because the one minute of freedom in which he writes is enough to make him powerful and
things in the process of time into an ideal above time, empty and inaccessible.

A writer's influence is linked to this privilege of being master of everything. But he is only master of everything, he possesses only the infinite; he lacks the finite, limit escapes him. Now, one cannot act in the infinite, one cannot accomplish anything in the unlimited, so that if a writer acts in quite a real way as he produces this real thing which is called a book, he is also discrediting all action by this action, because he is substituting for the world of determined things and defined work a world in which everything is instantly given and there is nothing left to do but read it and enjoy it.

In general, the writer seems to be subjected to a state of inactivity because he is the master of the imaginary, and those who follow him into the realm of the imaginary lose sight of the problems of their true lives. But the danger he represents is much more serious. The truth is that he ruins action, not because he deals with what is unreal but because he makes all of reality available to us. Unreality begins with the whole. The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole. That is why it is not in the world, because it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins, for when literary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of everything, from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing.

Certainly that literature which is said to be "purely imaginative" has its dangers. First of all, it is not pure imagination. It believes that it stands apart from everyday realities and actual events, but the truth is that it has stepped aside from them; it is that distance, that remove from the everyday which necessarily takes the everyday into consideration and describes it as separateness, as pure strangeness. What is more, it makes this distance into an absolute value, and then this separateness seems to be a source of general understanding, the capacity to grasp everything and attain everything immediately, for those who submit to its enchantment enough to emerge from both their life, which is nothing but limited understanding, and time, which is nothing but a narrow perspective. All this is the lie of a fiction. But this kind of literature has on its side the fact that it is not trying to deceive us: it presents itself as imaginary; it puts to sleep only those who want to go to sleep.

What is far more deceitful is the literature of action. It calls on people to do something. But if it wants to remain authentic literature, it must base its representation of this "something to do," this predetermined and specific goal, on a world where such an action turns back into the unreality of an abstract and absolute value. "Something to do," as it may be expressed in a work of literature, is never more than "everything remains to be done," whether it presents itself as this "everything," that is, as an absolute value, or whether it needs this "everything," into which it vanishes, to justify itself and prove that it has merit. The language of a writer, even if he is a revolutionary, is not the language of command. It does not command, it presents; and it does not present by causing whatever it portrays to be present, but by portraying it behind everything, as the meaning and the absence of this everything. The result is either that the appeal of the author to the reader is only an empty appeal, and expresses only the effort which a man cut off from the world makes to reenter the world, as he stands discreetly at its periphery—or that the "something to do," which can be recovered only by starting from absolute values, appears to the reader precisely as that which cannot be done or as that which requires neither work nor action in order to be done.

As we know, a writer's main temptations are called stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. These are all ways of thinking that a writer adopts for reasons he believes he has thought out carefully, but which only literature has thought out in him. A stoic: he is the man of the universe, which itself exists only on paper, and, a prisoner or a poor man, he endures his condition stoically because he can write and because the one minute of freedom in which he writes is enough to make him powerful and
free, is enough to give him not his own freedom, which he derides, but universal freedom. A nihilist, because he does not simply negate this and that by methodical work which slowly transforms each thing; he negates everything at once, and he is obliged to negate everything, since he deals only with everything. The unhappy consciousness! It is only too evident that this unhappiness is his most profound talent, since he is a writer only by virtue of his fragmented consciousness divided into irreconcilable moments called inspiration—which negates all work; work—which negates the nothingness of genius; the ephemeral work—in which he creates himself by negating himself; the work as everything—in which he takes back from himself and from other people everything which he seems to give to himself and to them. But there is one other temptation.

Let us acknowledge that in a writer there is a movement which proceeds without pause, and almost without transition, from nothing to everything. Let us see in him that negation that is not satisfied with the unreality in which it exists, because it wishes to realize itself and can do so only by negating something real, more real than words, more true than the isolated individual in control: it therefore keeps urging him toward a worldly life and a public existence in order to induce him to conceive how, even as he writes, he can become that very existence. It is at this point that he encounters those decisive moments in history when everything seems put in question, when law, faith, the State, the world above, the world of the past—everything sinks effortlessly, without work, into nothingness. The man knows he has not stepped out of history, but history is now the void, the void in the process of realization; it is absolute freedom which has become an event. Such periods are given the name Revolution. At this moment, freedom aspires to be realized in the immediate form of everything is possible, everything can be done. A fabulous moment—and no one who has experienced it can completely recover from it, since he has experienced history as his own history and his own freedom as universal freedom. These moments are, in fact, fabulous moments: in them, fable speaks; in them, the speech of fable becomes action. That the writer should be tempted by them is completely appropriate. Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute. Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world. Revolutionary action also has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but that it is itself the ultimate goal, the Last Act. This last act is freedom, and the only choice left is between freedom and nothing. This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is Freedom or Death. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being. People cease to be individuals working at specific tasks, acting here and only now: each person is universal freedom, and universal freedom knows nothing about elsewhere or tomorrow, or work or a work accomplished. At such times there is nothing left for anyone to do, because everything has been done. No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect—the person who has a secret, who keeps a thought, an intimacy to himself. And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physically distinct existence. This is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak: death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right; he is not suppressed as a guilty person—he needs death so that he can proclaim himself a citizen, and it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes him to be born. Where this is concerned, the French Revolution has a clearer meaning than any other revolution. Death in the Reign of Terror is not simply a way of punishing seditionaries; rather, since it becomes the unavoidable, in some sense the desired lot of everyone, it appears as the very operation of freedom in free men. When the blade falls on Saint-Just and Robespierre, in a sense it executes no one. Robespierre's virtue, Saint-Just's relentlessness, are simply their existences already suppressed, the anticipated presence of
free, is enough to give him not his own freedom, which he derides, but universal freedom. A nihilist, because he does not simply negate this and that by methodical work which slowly transforms each thing: he negates everything at once, and he is obliged to negate everything, since he deals only with everything. The unhappy consciousness! It is only too evident that this unhappiness is his most profound talent, since he is a writer only by virtue of his fragmented consciousness divided into irreconcilable moments called inspiration—which negates all work; work—which negates the nothingness of genius; the ephemeral work—in which he creates himself by negating himself; the work as everything—in which he takes back from himself and from other people everything which he seems to give to himself and to them. But there is one other temptation.

Let us acknowledge that in a writer there is a movement which proceeds without pause, and almost without transition, from nothing to everything. Let us see in him that negation that is not satisfied with the unreality in which it exists, because it wishes to realize itself and can do so only by negating something real, more real than words, more true than the isolated individual in control: it therefore keeps urging him toward a worldly life and a public existence in order to induce him to conceive how, even as he writes, he can become that very existence. It is at this point that he encounters those decisive moments in history when everything seems put in question, when law, faith, the State, the world above, the world of the past—everything sinks effortlessly, without work, into nothingness. The man knows he has not stepped out of history, but history is now the void, the void in the process of realization; it is absolute freedom which has become an event. Such periods are given the name Revolution. At this moment, freedom aspires to be realized in the immediate form of everything is possible, everything can be done. A fabulous moment—and no one who has experienced it can completely recover from it, since he has experienced history as his own history and his own freedom as universal freedom. These moments are, in fact, fabulous moments: in them, fable speaks; in them, the speech of fable becomes action. That the writer should be tempted by them is completely appropriate. Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute. Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world. Revolutionary action also has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but that it is itself the ultimate goal, the Last Act. This last act is freedom, and the only choice left is between freedom and nothing. This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is Freedom or Death. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being. People cease to be individuals working at specific tasks, acting here and only now: each person is universal freedom, and universal freedom knows nothing about elsewhere or tomorrow, or work or a work accomplished. At such times there is nothing left for anyone to do, because everything has been done. No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect—the person who has a secret, who keeps a thought, an intimacy to himself. And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physically distinct existence. This is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak: death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right; he is not suppressed as a guilty person—he needs death so that he can proclaim himself a citizen, and it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes him to be born. Where this is concerned, the French Revolution has a clearer meaning than any other revolution. Death in the Reign of Terror is not simply a way of punishing seditionaries; rather, since it becomes the unavoidable, in some sense the desired lot of everyone, it appears as the very operation of freedom in free men. When the blade falls on Saint-Just and Robespierre, in a sense it executes no one. Robespierre's virtue, Saint-Just's relentlessness, are simply their existences already suppressed, the anticipated presence of
their deaths, the decision to allow freedom to assert itself completely in them and through its universality to negate the particular reality of their lives. Granted, perhaps they caused the Reign of Terror to take place. But the Terror they personify does not come from the death they inflict on others but from the death they inflict on themselves. They bear its features, they do their thinking and make their decisions with death sitting on their shoulders, and this is why their thinking is cold, implacable; it has the freedom of a decapitated head. The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own death, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they are conscious of their death, which they realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other living people but like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history.

Death as an event no longer has any importance. During the Reign of Terror individuals die and it means nothing. In the famous words of Hegel, "It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water." Why? Isn't death the achievement of freedom—that is, the richest moment of meaning? But it is also only the empty point in that freedom, a manifestation of the fact that such a freedom is still abstract, ideal (literary), that it is only poverty and platitude. Each person dies, but everyone is alive, and that really also means everyone is dead. But "is dead" is the positive side of freedom which has become the world: here, being is revealed as absolute. "Dying," on the other hand, is pure insignificance, an event without concrete reality, one which has lost all value as a personal and interior drama because there is no longer any interior. It is the moment when I die signifies to me as I die a banality which there is no way to take into consideration: in the liberated world and in these moments when freedom is an absolute apparition, dying is unimportant and death has no depth. The Reign of Terror and revolution—not war—have taught us this.

The writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history. It is his truth. Any writer who is not induced by the very fact of writing to think, "I am the revolution, only freedom allows me to write," is not really writing. In 1793 there is a man who identifies himself completely with revolution and the Reign of Terror. He is an aristocrat clinging to the battlements of his medieval castle, a tolerant man, rather shy and obsequiously polite: but he writes, all he does is write, and it does not matter that freedom puts him back into the Bastille after having brought him out, he is the one who understands freedom the best, because he understands that it is a time when the most insane passions can turn into political realities, a time when they have a right to be seen, and are the law. He is also the man for whom death is the greatest passion and the ultimate platitude, who cuts off people's heads the way you cut a head of cabbage, with such great indifference that nothing is more unreal than the death he inflicts, and yet no one has been more acutely aware that death is sovereign, that freedom is death. Sade is the writer par excellence, he combines all the writer's contradictions. Alone: of all men he is the most alone, and yet at the same time a public figure and an important political personage; forever locked up and yet absolutely free, theoretician and symbol of absolute freedom. He writes a vast body of work, and that work exists for no one. Unknown: but what he portrays has an immediate significance for everyone. He is nothing more than a writer, and he depicts life raised to the level of a passion, a passion which has become cruelty and madness. He turns the most bizarre, the most hidden, the most unreasonable kind of feeling into a universal affirmation, the reality of a public statement which is consigned to history to become a legitimate explanation of man's general condition. He is, finally, negation itself: his oeuvre is nothing but the work of negation, his experience the action of a furious negation, driven to blood, denying other people, denying God, denying nature, and, within this circle in which it runs endlessly, reveling in itself as absolute sovereignty.

Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment

* Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, p. 360.—TRANS.
their deaths, the decision to allow freedom to assert itself completely in them and through its universality to negate the particular reality of their lives. Granted, perhaps they caused the Reign of Terror to take place. But the Terror they personify does not come from the death they inflict on others but from the death they inflict on themselves. They bear its features, they do their thinking and make their decisions with death sitting on their shoulders, and this is why their thinking is cold, implacable; it has the freedom of a decapitated head. The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own death, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they are conscious of their death, which they realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other living people but like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history.

Death as an event no longer has any importance. During the Reign of Terror individuals die and it means nothing. In the famous words of Hegel, "It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water."* Why? Isn't death the achievement of freedom—that is, the richest moment of meaning? But it is also only the empty point in that freedom, a manifestation of the fact that such a freedom is still abstract, ideal (literary), that it is only poverty and platitude. Each person dies, but everyone is alive, and that really also means everyone is dead. But "is dead" is the positive side of freedom which has become the world: here, being is revealed as absolute. "Dying," on the other hand, is pure insignificance, an event without concrete reality, one which has lost all value as a personal and interior drama because there is no longer any interior. It is the moment when I die signifies to me as I die a banality which there is no way to take into consideration: in the liberated world and in these moments when freedom is an absolute apparition, dying is unimportant and death has no depth. The Reign of Terror and revolution—not war—have taught us this.

* Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, p. 360.—TRANS.

The writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history. It is his truth. Any writer who is not induced by the very fact of writing to think, "I am the revolution, only freedom allows me to write," is not really writing. In 1793 there is a man who identifies himself completely with revolution and the Reign of Terror. He is an aristocrat clinging to the battlements of his medieval castle, a tolerant man, rather shy and obsequiously polite: but he writes, all he does is write, and it does not matter that freedom puts him back into the Bastille after having brought him out, he is the one who understands freedom the best, because he understands that it is a time when the most insane passions can turn into political realities, a time when they have a right to be seen, and are the law. He is also the man for whom death is the greatest passion and the ultimate platitude, who cuts off people's heads the way you cut a head of cabbage, with such great indifference that nothing is more unreal than the death he inflicts, and yet no one has been more acutely aware that death is sovereign, that freedom is death. Sade is the writer par excellence, he combines all the writer's contradictions. Alone: of all men he is the most alone, and yet at the same time a public figure and an important political personage; forever locked up and yet absolutely free, theoretician and symbol of absolute freedom. He writes a vast body of work, and that work exists for no one. Unknown: but what he portrays has an immediate significance for everyone. He is nothing more than a writer, and he depicts life raised to the level of a passion, a passion which has become cruelty and madness. He turns the most bizarre, the most hidden, the most unreasonable kind of feeling into a universal affirmation, the reality of a public statement which is consigned to history to become a legitimate explanation of man's general condition. He is, finally, negation itself: his oeuvre is nothing but the work of negation, his experience the action of a furious negation, driven to blood, denying other people, denying God, denying nature, and, within this circle in which it runs endlessly, reveling in itself as absolute sovereignty.

Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment
when "life endures death and maintains itself in it" in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the "question" that seeks to pose itself in literature, the "question" that is its essence. Literature is bound to language. Language is reassuring and disquieting at the same time. When we speak, we gain control over things with satisfying ease. I say, "This woman," and she is immediately available to me. I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be, she becomes the place in which the most surprising sorts of transformations occur and actions unfold: speech is life's ease and security. We cannot do anything with an object that has no name. Primitive man knows that the possession of words gives him mastery over things, but for him the relationship between words and the world is so close that the manipulation of language is as difficult and as fraught with peril as contact with living beings: the name has not emerged from the thing, it is the inside of the thing which has been dangerously brought out into the open and yet it is still the hidden depths of the thing; the thing has therefore not yet been named. The more closely man becomes attached to a civilization, the more he can manipulate words with innocence and composure. Is it that words have lost all relation to what they designate? But this absence of relation is not a defect, and if it is a defect, this defect is the only thing that gives language its full value, so that of all languages the most perfect is the language of mathematics, which is spoken in a rigorous way and to which no entity corresponds.

I say, "This woman." Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvelous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, "This woman," I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious right. In a text dating from before The Phenomenology, Hegel, here the friend and kindred spirit of Hölderlin, writes:

"Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)."* Hegel means that from that moment on, the cat ceased to be a uniquely real cat and became an idea as well. The meaning of speech, then, requires that before any word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all of creation into a total sea. God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared; only instead of beings (êtres) and, as we say, existants (existants), there remained only being (l'être), and man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create. He saw that he was enclosed in daylight, and he knew this day could not end, because the end itself was light, since it was from the end of beings that their meaning—which is being—had come.

Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet, when I say, "This woman," real death has been announced and is already present in my language: my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is.

Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose.

* From a collection of essays titled System of 1801–1804. A. Kojève, in his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, interpreting a passage from the Phenomenology, demonstrates in a remarkable way how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder.
when "life endures death and maintains itself in it" in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the "question" that seeks to pose itself in literature, the "question" that is its essence. Literature is bound to language. Language is reassuring and disquieting at the same time. When we speak, we gain control over things with satisfying ease. I say, "This woman," and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be, she becomes the place in which the most surprising sorts of transformations occur and actions unfold: speech is life's ease and security. We cannot do anything with an object that has no name. Primitive man knows that the possession of words gives him mastery over things, but for him the relationship between words and the world is so close that the manipulation of language is as difficult and as fraught with peril as contact with living beings: the name has not emerged from the thing, it is the inside of the thing which has been dangerously brought out into the open and yet it is still the hidden depths of the thing: the thing has therefore not yet been named. The more closely man becomes attached to a civilization, the more he can manipulate words with innocence and composure. Is it that words have lost all relation to what they designate? But this absence of relation is not a defect, and if it is a defect, this defect is the only thing that gives language its full value, so that of all languages the most perfect is the language of mathematics, which is spoken in a rigorous way and to which no entity corresponds.

I say, "This woman." Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvelous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, "This woman," I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious right. In a text dating from before The Phenomenology, Hegel, here the friend and kindred spirit of Hölderlin, writes:

"Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)."* Hegel means that from that moment on, the cat ceased to be a uniquely real cat and became an idea as well. The meaning of speech, then, requires that before any word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all of creation into a total sea. God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared; only instead of beings (êtres) and, as we say, existants (existants), there remained only being (l'être), and man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create. He saw that he was enclosed in daylight, and he knew this day could not end, because the end itself was light, since it was from the end of beings that their meaning—which is being—had come.

Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet, when I say, "This woman," real death has been announced and is already present in my language: my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is.

Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose

* From a collection of essays titled System of 1801–1804. A. Kojève, in his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, interpreting a passage from the Phenomenology, demonstrates in a remarkable way how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder.
in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness.

This situation has various consequences. Clearly, in me, the power to speak is also linked to my absence from being. I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void. When I speak, I deny the existence of what I am saying, but I also deny the existence of the person who is saying it: if my speech reveals being in its nonexistence, it also affirms that this revelation is made on the basis of the nonexistence of the person making it, out of his power to remove himself from himself, to be other than his being. This is why, if true language is to begin, the life that will carry this language must have experienced its nothingness, must have "trembled in the depths; and everything in it that was fixed and stable must have been shaken." Language can begin only with the void: no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. Negation is tied to language. When I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something; rather, a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech, and the being of speech is nothing. This formulation explains why literature's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing. That is not the musing of a high-class kind of nihilism. Language perceives that its meaning derives not from what exists but from its own retreat before existence, and it is tempted to proceed no further than this retreat, to try to attain negation in itself and to make everything of nothing. If one is not to talk about things except to say what makes them nothing, then to say nothing is really the only hope of saying everything about them.

A hope which is naturally problematic. Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not. Yet for a moment everyday language is right, in that even if the word excludes the existence of what it designates, it still refers to it through the thing's nonexistence, which has become its essence. To name the cat is, if you like, to make it into a non-cat, a cat that has ceased to exist, has ceased to be a living cat, but this does not mean one is making it into a dog, or even a non-dog. That is the primary difference between common language and literary language. The first accepts that once the nonexistence of the cat has passed into the word, the cat itself comes to life again fully and certainly in the form of its idea (its being) and its meaning: on the level of being (idea), the word restores to the cat all the certainty it had on the level of existence. And in fact that certainty is even much greater: things can change if they have to, sometimes they stop being what they are—they remain hostile, unavailable, inaccessible; but the being of these things, their idea, does not change: the idea is definitive, it is sure, we even call it eternal. Let us hold on to words, then, and not revert back to things, let us not let go of words, not believe they are sick. Then we shall be at peace.

Common language is probably right, this is the price we pay for our peace. But literary language is made of uneasiness; it is also made of contradictions. Its position is not very stable or secure. On the one hand, its only interest in a thing is in the meaning of the thing, its absence, and it would like to attain this absence absolutely in itself and for itself, to grasp in its entirety the infinite movement of comprehension. What is more, it observes that the word "cat" is not only the nonexistence of the cat but a nonexistence made word, that is, a completely determined and objective reality. It sees that there is a difficulty and even a lie in this. How can it hope to have achieved what it set out to do, since it has
in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because its contains the condition for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness.

This situation has various consequences. Clearly, in me, the power to speak is also linked to my absence from being. I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void. When I speak, I deny the existence of what I am saying, but I also deny the existence of the person who is saying it: if my speech reveals being in its nonexistence, it also affirms that this revelation is made on the basis of the nonexistence of the person making it, out of his power to remove himself from himself, to be other than his being. This is why, if true language is to begin, the life that will carry this language must have experienced its nothingness, must have "trembled in the depths; and everything in it that was fixed and stable must have been shaken." Language can begin only with the void: no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. Negation is tied to language. When I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something; rather, a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech, and the being of speech is nothing. This formulation explains why literature's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing. That is not the musings of a high-class kind of nihilism. Language perceives that its meaning derives not from what exists but from its own retreat before existence, and it is tempted to proceed no further than this retreat, to try to attain negation in itself and to make everything of nothing. If one is not to talk about things except to say what makes them nothing, then to say nothing is really the only hope of saying everything about them.

A hope which is naturally problematic. Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not. Yet for a moment everyday language is right, in that even if the word excludes the existence of what it designates, it still refers to it through the thing's nonexistence, which has become its essence. To name the cat is, if you like, to make it into a non-cat, a cat that has ceased to exist, has ceased to be a living cat, but this does not mean one is making it into a dog, or even a non-dog. That is the primary difference between common language and literary language. The first accepts that once the nonexistence of the cat has passed into the word, the cat itself comes to life again fully and certainly in the form of its idea (its being) and its meaning: on the level of being (idea), the word restores to the cat all the certainty it had on the level of existence. And in fact that certainty is even much greater: things can change if they have to, sometimes they stop being what they are—they remain hostile, unavailable, inaccessible: but the being of these things, their idea, does not change: the idea is definitive, it is sure, we even call it eternal. Let us hold on to words, then, and not revert back to things, let us not let go of words, not believe they are sick. Then we shall be at peace.

Common language is probably right, this is the price we pay for our peace. But literary language is made of uneasiness; it is also made of contradictions. Its position is not very stable or secure. On the one hand, its only interest in a thing is in the meaning of the thing, its absence, and it would like to attain this absence absolutely in itself and for itself, to grasp in its entirety the infinite movement of comprehension. What is more, it observes that the word “cat” is not only the nonexistence of the cat but a nonexistence made word, that is, a completely determined and objective reality. It sees that there is a difficulty and even a lie in this. How can it hope to have achieved what it set out to do, since it has
transposed the unreality of the thing into the reality of language? How could the infinite absence of comprehension consent to be confused with the limited, restricted presence of a single word? And isn't everyday language mistaken when it tries to persuade us of this? In fact, it is deceiving itself and it is deceiving us, too. Speech is not sufficient for the truth it contains. Take the trouble to listen to a single word: in that word, nothingness is struggling and toiling away, it digs tirelessly, doing its utmost to find a way out, nullifying what encloses it—it is infinite disquiet, formless and nameless vigilance. Already the seal which held this nothingness within the limits of the word and within the guise of its meaning has been broken; now there is access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence—they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of "turns of phrase" which do not lead anywhere. Thus is born the image that does not directly designate the thing but, rather, what the thing is not; it speaks of a dog instead of a cat. This is how the pursuit begins in which all of language, in motion, is asked to give in to the uneasy demands of one single thing that has been deprived of being and that, after having wandered between each word, tries to lay hold of them all again in order to negate them all at once, so that they will designate the void as they sink down into it—this void which they can neither fill nor represent.

Even if literature stopped here, it would have a strange and embarrassing job to do. But it does not stop here. It recalls the first name which would be the murder Hegel speaks of. The "existant" was called out of its existence by the word, and it became being. This Lazare, veni foras summoned the dark, cadaverous reality from its primordial depths and in exchange gave it only the life of the mind. Language knows that its kingdom is day and not the intimacy of the unrevealed; it knows that in order for the day to begin, for the day to be that Orient which Hölderlin glimpsed—not light that has become the repose of noon but the terrible force that draws beings into the world and illuminates them—something must be left out. Negation cannot be created out of anything but the reality of what it is negating; language derives its value and its pride from the fact that it is the achievement of this negation; but in the beginning, what was lost? The torment of language is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this. It cannot even name it.

Whoever sees God dies. In speech what dies is what gives life to speech; speech is the life of that death, it is "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it." What wonderful power. But something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists before, if all my power consists of making it into what exists after? The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble taking the side of things, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life. I say a flower! But in the absence where I mention it, through the oblivion to which I relegate the image it gives me, in the depths of this heavy word, itself looming up like an unknown thing, I passionately summon the darkness of this flower, I summon this perfume that passes through me though I do not breathe it, this dust that impregnates me though I do not see it, this color which is a trace and not light. Then what hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away? My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand. Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is a written thing, a bit...
transposed the unreality of the thing into the reality of language? How could the infinite absence of comprehension consent to be confused with the limited, restricted presence of a single word? And isn't everyday language mistaken when it tries to persuade us of this? In fact, it is deceiving itself and it is deceiving us, too. Speech is not sufficient for the truth it contains. Take the trouble to listen to a single word: in that word, nothingness is struggling and toiling away, it digs tirelessly, doing its utmost to find a way out, nullifying what encloses it—it is infinite disquiet, formless and nameless vigilance. Already the seal which held this nothingness within the limits of the word and within the guise of its meaning has been broken; now there is access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence— they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of "turns of phrase" which do not lead anywhere. Thus is born the image that does not directly designate the thing but, rather, what the thing is not; it speaks of a dog instead of a cat. This is how the pursuit begins in which all of language, in motion, is asked to give in to the uneasy demands of one single thing that has been deprived of being and that, after having wavered between each word, tries to lay hold of them all again in order to negate them all at once, so that they will designate the void as they sink down into it—this void which they can neither fill nor represent.

Even if literature stopped here, it would have a strange and embarrassing job to do. But it does not stop here. It recalls the first name which would be the murder Hegel speaks of. The "existant" was called out of its existence by the word, and it became being. This Lazare, veni foras summoned the dark, cadaverous reality from its primordial depths and in exchange gave it only the life of the mind. Language knows that its kingdom is day and not the intimacy of the unrevealed; it knows that in order for the day to begin, for the day to be that Orient which Hölderlin glimpsed—not light that has become the repose of noon but the terrible force that draws beings into the world and illuminates them—something must be left out. Negation cannot be created out of anything but the reality of what it is negating; language derives its value and its pride from the fact that it is the achievement of this negation; but in the beginning, what was lost? The torment of language is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this. It cannot even name it.

Whoever sees God dies. In speech what dies is what gives life to speech; speech is the life of that death, it is "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it." What wonderful power. But something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists before, if all my power consists of making it into what exists after? The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble taking the side of things, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life. I say a flower! But in the absence where I mention it, through the oblivion to which I relegate the image it gives me, in the depths of this heavy word, itself looming up like an unknown thing, I passionately summon the darkness of this flower, I summon this perfume that passes through me though I do not breathe it, this dust that impregnates me though I do not see it, this color which is a trace and not light. Then what hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away? My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand. Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is a written thing, a bit
of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist. The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them really present outside of themselves. It is an element, a piece barely detached from its subterranean surroundings: it is no longer a name, but rather one moment in the universal anonymity, a bald statement, the stupor of a confrontation in the depths of obscurity. And in this way language insists on playing its own game without man, who created it. Literature now dispenses with the writer: it is no longer this inspiration at work, this negation asserting itself, this idea inscribed in the world as though it were the absolute perspective of the world in its totality. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists. That is why it cannot be confused with consciousness, which illuminates things and makes decisions; it is my consciousness without me, the radiant passivity of mineral substances, the lucidity of the depths of torpor. It is not the night, it is the obsession of the night; it is not the night but the consciousness of the night, which lies awake watching for a chance to surprise itself and because of that is constantly being dissipated. It is not the day, it is the side of the day that day has rejected in order to become light. And it is not death either, because it manifests existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end—death as the impossibility of dying.

By turning itself into an inability to reveal anything, literature is attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys. This is a tragic endeavor. Literature says, "I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present." But this wish to be a thing, this refusal to mean anything, a refusal immersed in words turned to salt; in short, this destiny which literature becomes as it becomes the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of a consciousness deprived of self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact that it is visible—all this is what literature now manifests, what literature now shows. If it were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind that stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse.

Literature learns that it cannot go beyond itself toward its own end: it hides, it does not give itself away. It knows it is the movement through which whatever disappears keeps appearing. When it names something, whatever it designates is abolished; but whatever is abolished is also sustained, and the thing has found a refuge (in the being which is the word) rather than a threat. When literature refuses to name anything, when it turns a name into something obscure and meaningless, witness to the primordial obscurity, what has disappeared in this case—the meaning of the name—is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as expression of the obscurity of existence, so that although the precise meaning of the terms has faded, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning—a strange impersonal light.

By negating the day, literature re-creates day in the form of fatality; by affirming the night, it finds the night as the impossibility of the night. This is its discovery. When day is the light of the world, it illuminates what it lets us see: it is the capacity to grasp, to live, it is the answer "understood" in every question. But if we call the day to account, if we reach a point where we push it away in order to find out what is prior to the day, under it we discover that the day is already present, and that what is prior to the day is still the day, but in the form of an inability to disappear, not a capacity to make something appear: the darkness of necessity, not the light of freedom. The nature, then, of what is prior to the day, of prediurnal existence, is the dark side of the day, and that dark side is not the undisclosed mystery of its beginning but its inevitable presence—the statement "There is no day," which merges with "There is already day," its appearance coinciding with the moment
of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist. The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them *really* present outside of themselves. It is an element, a piece barely detached from its subterranean surroundings: it is no longer a name, but rather one moment in the universal anonymity, a bald statement, the stupor of a confrontation in the depths of obscurity. And in this way language insists on playing its own game without man, who created it. Literature now dispenses with the writer: it is no longer this inspiration at work, this negation asserting itself, this idea inscribed in the world as though it were the absolute perspective of the world in its totality. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the *world* exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists. That is why it cannot be confused with consciousness, which illuminates things and makes decisions; it is *my* consciousness *without me*, the radiant passivity of mineral substances, the lucidity of the depths of torpor. It is not the night, it is the obsession of the night; it is not the night but the consciousness of the night, which lies awake watching for a chance to surprise itself and because of that is constantly being dissipated. It is not the day, it is the side of the day that day has rejected in order to become light. And it is not death either, because it manifests existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end—death as the impossibility of dying.

By turning itself into an inability to reveal anything, literature is attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys. This is a tragic endeavor. Literature says, “I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present.” But this wish to be a thing, this refusal to mean anything, a refusal immersed in words turned to salt; in short, this destiny which literature becomes as it becomes the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of a consciousness deprived of self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact that it is visible—all this is what literature now manifests, what literature now shows. If it were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind that stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse.

Literature learns that it cannot go beyond itself toward its own end: it hides, it does not give itself away. It knows it is the movement through which whatever disappears keeps appearing. When it names something, whatever it designates is abolished; but whatever is abolished is also sustained, and the thing has found a refuge (in the being which is the word) rather than a threat. When literature refuses to name anything, when it turns a name into something obscure and meaningless, witness to the primordial obscurity, what has disappeared in this case—the meaning of the name—is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as expression of the obscurity of existence, so that although the precise meaning of the terms has faded, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning—a strange impersonal light.

By negating the day, literature re-creates day in the form of fatality; by affirming the night, it finds the night as the impossibility of the night. This is its discovery. When day is the light of the world, it illuminates what it lets us see: it is the capacity to grasp, to live, it is the answer “understood” in every question. But if we call the day to account, if we reach a point where we push it away in order to find out what is prior to the day, under it we discover that the day is already present, and that what is prior to the day is still the day, but in the form of an inability to disappear, not a capacity to make something appear: the darkness of necessity, not the light of freedom. The nature, then, of what is prior to the day, of prediurnal existence, is the dark side of the day, and that dark side is not the undisclosed mystery of its beginning but its inevitable presence—the statement “There is no day,” which merges with “There is already day,” its appearance coinciding with the moment
when it has not yet appeared. In the course of the day, the day allows us to escape from things, it lets us comprehend them, and as it lets us comprehend them, it makes them transparent and as if null—but what we cannot escape from is the day: within it we are free, but it, itself, is fatality, and day in the form of fatality is the being of what is prior to the day, the existence we must turn away from in order to speak and comprehend.

If one looks at it in a certain way, literature has two slopes. One side of literature is turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated. Literature is not content to accept only the fragmentary, successive results of this movement of negation: it wants to grasp the movement itself and it wants to comprehend the results in their totality. If negation is assumed to have gotten control of everything, then real things, taken one by one, all refer back to that unreal whole which they form together, to the world which is their meaning as a group, and this is the point of view that literature has adopted—it looks at things from the point of view of this still imaginary whole which they would really constitute if negation could be achieved. Hence its non-realism—the shadow which is its prey. Hence its distrust of words, its need to apply the movement of negation to language itself and to exhaust it by realizing it as that totality on the basis of which each term would be nothing.

But there is another side to literature. Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silence existence: literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside. In this way, it sympathizes with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way, too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces—through its refusal to say anything—that it comes from night and will return to night. In itself, this metamorphosis is not unsuccessful. It is certainly true that words are transformed. They no longer signify shadow, earth, they no longer represent the absence of shadow and earth which is meaning, which is the shadow's light, which is the transparency of the earth: opacity is their answer; the flutter of closing wings is their speech; in them, physical weight is present as the stifling density of an accumulation of syllables that has lost all meaning. The metamorphosis has taken place. But beyond the change that has solidified, petrified, and stupefied words two things reappear in this metamorphosis: the meaning of this metamorphosis, which illuminates the words, and the meaning the words contain by virtue of their apparition as things or, if it should happen this way, as vague, indeterminate, elusive existences in which nothing appears, the heart of depth without appearance. Literature certainly triumphed over the meaning of words, but what it has found in words considered apart from their meaning is meaning that has become thing: and thus it is meaning detached from its conditions, separated from its moments, wandering like an empty power, a power no one can do anything with, a power without power, the simple inability to cease to be, but which, because of that, appears to be the proper determination of indeterminate and meaningless existence. In this endeavor, literature does not confine itself to rediscovering in the interior what it tried to leave behind on the threshold. Because what it finds, as the interior, is the outside which has been changed from the outlet it once was into the impossibility of going out—and what it finds as the darkness of existence is the being of day which has been changed from expiatory light, creative of meaning, into the aggravation of what one cannot prevent oneself from understanding and the stifling obsession of a reason without any principle, without any beginning, which one cannot account for. Literature is that experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness, in the movement whereby, as it disappears, as it tears itself away from the meticulousness of an I, it is re-created beyond unconsciousness as an impersonal spontaneity, the desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which
when it has not yet appeared. In the course of the day, the day allows us to escape from things, it lets us comprehend them, and as it lets us comprehend them, it makes them transparent and as if null—but what we cannot escape from is the day: within it we are free, but it, itself, is fatality, and day in the form of fatality is the being of what is prior to the day, the existence we must turn away from in order to speak and comprehend.

If one looks at it in a certain way, literature has two slopes. One side of literature is turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated. Literature is not content to accept only the fragmentary, successive results of this movement of negation: it wants to grasp the movement itself and it wants to comprehend the results in their totality. If negation is assumed to have gotten control of everything, then real things, taken one by one, all refer back to that unreal whole which they form together, to the world which is their meaning as a group, and this is the point of view that literature has adopted—it looks at things from the point of view of this still imaginary whole which they would really constitute if negation could be achieved. Hence its non-realism—the shadow which is its prey. Hence its distrust of words, its need to apply the movement of negation to language itself and to exhaust it by realizing it as that totality on the basis of which each term would be nothing.

But there is another side to literature. Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silence existence: literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside. In this way, it sympathizes with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way, too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces—through its refusal to say anything—that it comes from night and will return to night. In itself, this metamorphosis is not unsuccessful. It is certainly true that words are transformed. They no longer signify shadow, earth, they no longer represent the absence of shadow and earth which is meaning, which is the shadow's light, which is the transparency of the earth: opacity is their answer; the flutter of closing wings is their speech; in them, physical weight is present as the stifling density of an accumulation of syllables that has lost all meaning. The metamorphosis has taken place. But beyond the change that has solidified, petrified, and stupefied words two things reappear in this metamorphosis: the meaning of this metamorphosis, which illuminates the words, and the meaning the words contain by virtue of their apparition as things or, if it should happen this way, as vague, indeterminate, elusive existences in which nothing appears, the heart of depth without appearance. Literature has certainly triumphed over the meaning of words, but what it has found in words considered apart from their meaning is meaning that has become thing: and thus it is meaning detached from its conditions, separated from its moments, wandering like an empty power, a power no one can do anything with, a power without power, the simple inability to cease to be, but which, because of that, appears to be the proper determination of indeterminate and meaningless existence. In this endeavor, literature does not confine itself to rediscovering in the interior what it tried to leave behind on the threshold. Because what it finds, as the interior, is the outside which has been changed from the outlet it once was into the impossibility of going out—and what it finds as the darkness of existence is the being of day which has been changed from explanatory light, creative of meaning, into the aggravation of what one cannot prevent oneself from understanding and the stifling obsession of a reason without any principle, without any beginning, which one cannot account for. Literature is that experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness, in the movement whereby, as it disappears, as it tears itself away from the meticulousness of an I, it is re-created beyond unconsciousness as an impersonal spontaneity, the desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which
no one knows, and which ignorance always discovers behind itself as its own shadow changed into a gaze.

One can, then, accuse language of having become an interminable resifting of words instead of the silence it wanted to achieve. Or one can complain that it has immersed itself in the conventions of literature when what it wanted was to be absorbed into existence. That is true. But this endless resifting of words without content, this continuousness of speech through an immense pillage of words, is precisely the profound nature of a silence that talks even in its dumbness, a silence that is speech empty of words, an echo speaking on and on in the midst of silence. And in the same way literature, a blind vigilance which in its attempt to escape from itself plunges deeper and deeper into its own obsession, is the only rendering of the obsession of existence, if this itself is the very impossibility of emerging from existence, if it is being which is always flung back into being, that which in the bottomless depth is already at the bottom of the abyss, a recourse against which there is no recourse.*

Literature is divided between these two slopes. The problem is that even though they are apparently incompatible, they do not lead toward distinctly different works or goals, and that an art which purports to follow one slope is already on the other. The first slope is meaningful prose. Its goal is to express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean. This is the way everyone speaks; and many people write the way we speak. But still on this side of language, there comes a moment when art realizes that everyday speech is dishonest and abandons it. What is art's complaint about everyday speech? It says it lacks meaning: art feels it is madness to think that in each word some thing is completely present through the absence that determines it, and so art sets off in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension. We do not need to discuss this position again, we have described it at length already. But what can be said about this kind of art? That it is a search for a pure form, that it is a vain preoccupation with empty words? Quite the contrary: its only concern is true meaning; its only preoccupation is to safeguard the movement by which this meaning becomes truth. To be fair, we must consider it more significant than any ordinary prose, which only subsists on false meanings: it represents the world for us, it teaches us to discover the total being of the world, it is the work of the negative in the world and for the world. How can we help admiring it as preeminently active, lively, and lucid art? Of course we must. But then we must appreciate the same qualities in Mallarmé, who is the master of this art.

Mallarmé is on the other slope of literature, too. In some sense all the people we call poets come together on that slope. Why? Because they are interested in the reality of language, because they are not interested in the world, but in what things and beings would be if there were no world; because they devote themselves to literature as to an impersonal power that only wants to be engulfed and submerged. If this is what poetry is like, at least we will know why it must be withdrawn from history, where it produces a strange insectlike buzzing in the margins, and we will also know that no work which allows itself to slip down this slope toward the chasm can be called a work of prose. Well, what is it, then? Everyone understands that literature cannot be divided up, and that if you choose exactly where your place in it is, if you convince yourself that you really are where you wanted to be, you risk becoming very confused, because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into something you were not before. This is its treachery; this is also its cunning version of the truth. A novelist writes in the most transparent kind of prose, he describes men we could have met ourselves and actions

* In his book *Existence and Existents*, Emmanuel Lévinas uses the term *il y a* ("there is") to throw some "light" on this anonymous and impersonal flow of being that precedes all being, being that is already present in the heart of disappearance, that in the depths of annihilation still returns to being, being as the fatality of being, nothingness as existence: when there is nothing, *il y a* being. See also Deucalion I. (*Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis, Boston: Kluwer, 1978).—TRANS.
no one knows, and which ignorance always discovers behind itself as its own shadow changed into a gaze.

One can, then, accuse language of having become an interminable resifting of words instead of the silence it wanted to achieve. Or one can complain that it has immersed itself in the conventions of literature when what it wanted was to be absorbed into existence. That is true. But this endless resifting of words without content, this continuousness of speech through an immense pillage of words, is precisely the profound nature of a silence that talks even in its dumbness, a silence that is speech empty of words, an echo speaking on and on in the midst of silence. And in the same way literature, a blind vigilance which in its attempt to escape from itself plunges deeper and deeper into its own obsession, is the only rendering of the obsession of existence, if this itself is the very impossibility of emerging from existence, if it is being which is always flung back into being, that which in the bottomless depth is already at the bottom of the abyss, a recourse against which there is no recourse.*

Literature is divided between these two slopes. The problem is that even though they are apparently incompatible, they do not lead toward distinctly different works or goals, and that an art which purports to follow one slope is already on the other. The first slope is meaningful prose. Its goal is to express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean. This is the way everyone speaks; and many people write the way we speak. But still on this side of language, there comes a moment when art realizes that everyday speech is dishonest and abandons it. What is art's complaint about everyday speech? It says it lacks meaning: art feels it is madness to think that in each word some thing is completely present through the absence that determines it, and so art sets off in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension. We do not need to discuss this position again, we have described it at length already. But what can be said about this kind of art? That it is a search for a pure form, that it is a vain preoccupation with empty words? Quite the contrary: its only concern is true meaning; its only preoccupation is to safeguard the movement by which this meaning becomes truth. To be fair, we must consider it more significant than any ordinary prose, which only subsists on false meanings: it represents the world for us, it teaches us to discover the total being of the world, it is the work of the negative in the world and for the world. How can we help admiring it as preeminently active, lively, and lucid art? Of course we must. But then we must appreciate the same qualities in Mallarmé, who is the master of this art.

Mallarmé is on the other slope of literature, too. In some sense all the people we call poets come together on that slope. Why? Because they are interested in the reality of language, because they are not interested in the world, but in what things and beings would be if there were no world; because they devote themselves to literature as to an impersonal power that only wants to be engulfed and submerged. If this is what poetry is like, at least we will know why it must be withdrawn from history, where it produces a strange insectlike buzzing in the margins, and we will also know that no work which allows itself to slip down this slope toward the chasm can be called a work of prose. Well, what is it, then? Everyone understands that literature cannot be divided up, and that if you choose exactly where your place in it is, if you convince yourself that you really are where you wanted to be, you risk becoming very confused, because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into something you were not before. This is its treachery; this is also its cunning version of the truth. A novelist writes in the most transparent kind of prose, he describes men we could have met ourselves and actions

* In his book Existence and Existents, Emmanuel Lévinas uses the term il y a ("there is") to throw some "light" on this anonymous and impersonal flow of being that precedes all being, being that is already present in the heart of disappearance, that in the depths of annihilation still returns to being, being as the fatality of being, nothingness as existence: when there is nothing, il y a being. See also Deucalion I. (Existence and Existents, trans. A. Lingis, Boston: Kluwer, 1978).—TRANS.
we could have performed; he says his aim is to express the reality of a human world the way Flaubert did. In the end, though, his work really has only one subject. What is it? The horror of existence deprived of the world, the process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be, whatever is forgotten is always answerable to memory, whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying, whatever seeks to attain the beyond is always still here. This process is day which has become fatality, consciousness whose light is no longer the lucidity of the vigil but the stupor of lack of sleep, it is existence without being, as poetry tries to recapture it behind the meaning of words, which reject it.

Now, here is a man who does more observing than writing: he walks in a pine forest, looks at a wasp, picks up a stone. He is a sort of scholar, but this scholar fades away in the face of what he knows, sometimes in the face of what he wants to know; he is a man who learns for the sake of other men: he has gone over to the side of objects, sometimes he is water, sometimes a pebble, sometimes a tree, and when he observes things, he does it for the sake of things, and when he describes something, it is the thing itself that describes itself. Now, this is the surprising aspect of the transformation, because no doubt it is possible to become a tree, and is there any writer who could not succeed in making a tree talk? But Francis Ponge’s tree is a tree that has observed Francis Ponge and that describes itself as it imagines Ponge might describe it. These are strange descriptions. Certain traits make them seem completely human: the fact is that the tree knows the weakness of men who only speak about what they know; but all these metaphors borrowed from the picturesque human world, these images which form an image, really represent the way things regard man, they really represent the singularity of human speech animated by the life of the cosmos and the power of seeds; this is why other things slip in among these images, among certain objective notions—because the tree knows that science is a common ground of understanding between the two worlds: what slip in are vague recollections rising from deep down in the earth, expressions that are in the process of metamorphosing, words in which a thick fluidity of vegetable growth insinuates itself under the clear meaning. Doesn’t everyone think he understands these descriptions, written in perfectly meaningful prose? Doesn’t everyone think they belong to the clear and human side of literature? And yet they do not belong to the world but to the underside of the world; they do not attest to form but to lack of form, and they are clear only to a person who does not penetrate them, the opposite of the oracular words of the tree of Dodona—another tree—which were obscure but concealed a meaning: these are clear only because they hide their lack of meaning. Indeed, Ponge’s descriptions begin at that hypothetical moment after the world has been achieved, history completed, nature almost made human, when speech advances to meet the thing and the thing learns to speak. Ponge captures this touching moment when existence, which is still mute, encounters speech at the edge of the world, speech which as we know, is the murderer of existence. From the depths of dumbness, he hears the striving of an antediluvian language and he recognizes the profound work of the elements in the clear speech of the concept. In this way he becomes the will that mediates between that which is rising slowly to speech and speech which is descending slowly to the earth, expressing not existence as it was before the day but existence as it is after the day: the world of the end of the world.

Where in a work lies the beginning of the moment when the words become stronger than their meaning and the meaning more physical than the word? When does Lautréamont’s prose lose the name of prose? Isn’t each sentence understandable? Isn’t each group of sentences logical? And don’t the words say what they mean? At what moment, in this labyrinth of order, in this maze of clarity, did meaning stray from the path? At what turning did reason become aware that it had stopped “following,” that something else was continuing, progressing, concluding in its place, something like it in every way, something reason thought it recognized as itself, until the moment it woke up and discovered this other that had taken its place? But if reason now retraces its steps in order to denounce the intruder, the illusion immediately vanishes into thin air, reason finds only itself there, the prose is prose again, so that reason starts
we could have performed; he says his aim is to express the reality of a human world the way Flaubert did. In the end, though, his work really has only one subject. What is it? The horror of existence deprived of the world, the process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be, whatever is forgotten is always answerable to memory, whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying, whatever seeks to attain the beyond is always still here. This process is day which has become fatality, consciousness whose light is no longer the lucidity of the vigil but the stupor of lack of sleep, it is existence without being, as poetry tries to recapture it behind the meaning of words, which reject it.

Now here is a man who does more observing than writing: he walks in a pine forest, looks at a wasp, picks up a stone. He is a sort of scholar, but this scholar fades away in the face of what he knows, sometimes in the face of what he wants to know; he is a man who learns for the sake of other men: he has gone over to the side of objects, sometimes he is water, sometimes a pebble, sometimes a tree, and when he observes things, he does it for the sake of things, and when he describes something, it is the thing itself that describes itself. Now, this is the surprising aspect of the transformation, because no doubt it is possible to become a tree, and is there any writer who could not succeed in making a tree talk? But Francis Ponge's tree is a tree that has observed Francis Ponge and that describes itself as it imagines Ponge might describe it. These are strange descriptions. Certain traits make them seem completely human: the fact is that the tree knows the weakness of men who only speak about what they know; but all these metaphors borrowed from the picturesque human world, these images which form an image, really represent the way things regard man, they really represent the singularity of human speech animated by the life of the cosmos and the power of seeds; this is why other things slip in among these images, among certain objective notions—because the tree knows that science is a common ground of understanding between the two worlds: what slip in are vague recollections rising from deep down in the earth, expressions that are in the process of metamorphosing, words in which a thick fluidity of vegetable growth insinuates itself under the clear meaning. Doesn't everyone think he understands these descriptions, written in perfectly meaningful prose? Doesn't everyone think they belong to the clear and human side of literature? And yet they do not belong to the world but to the underside of the world; they do not attest to form but to lack of form, and they are clear only to a person who does not penetrate them, the opposite of the oracular words of the tree of Dodona—another tree—which were obscure but concealed a meaning: these are clear only because they hide their lack of meaning. Indeed, Ponge's descriptions begin at that hypothetical moment after the world has been achieved, history completed, nature almost made human, when speech advances to meet the thing and the thing learns to speak. Ponge captures this touching moment when existence, which is still mute, encounters speech at the edge of the world, speech which as we know, is the murderer of existence. From the depths of dumbness, he hears the striving of an antediluvian language and he recognizes the profound work of the elements in the clear speech of the concept. In this way he becomes the will that mediates between that which is rising slowly to speech and speech which is descending slowly to the earth, expressing not existence as it was before the day but existence as it is after the day: the world of the end of the world.

Where in a work lies the beginning of the moment when the words become stronger than their meaning and the meaning more physical than the word? When does Lautréamont's prose lose the name of prose? Isn't each sentence understandable? Isn't each group of sentences logical? And don't the words say what they mean? At what moment, in this labyrinth of order, in this maze of clarity, did meaning stray from the path? At what turning did reason become aware that it had stopped "following," that something else was continuing, progressing, concluding in its place, something like it in every way, something reason thought it recognized as itself, until the moment it woke up and discovered this other that had taken its place? But if reason now retraces its steps in order to denounce the intruder, the illusion immediately vanishes into thin air, reason finds only itself there, the prose is prose again, so that reason starts...
off again and loses its way again, allowing a sickening physical
substance to replace it, something like a walking staircase, a cor­
nidor that unfolds ahead—a kind of reason whose infallibility
excludes all reasoners, a logic that has become the “logic of things.”
Then where is the work? Each moment has the clarity of a beautiful
language being spoken, but the work as a whole has the opaque
meaning of a thing that is being eaten and that is also eating, that is
devouring, being swallowed up, and re-creating itself in a vain
effort to change itself into nothing.

Lautreamont is not a true writer of prose? But what is Sade's
style, if it isn't prose? And does anyone write more clearly than he
does? Is there anyone less familiar than he—who grew up in the
least poetic century—with the preoccupations of a literature in
search of obscurity? And yet in what other work do we hear such an
impersonal, inhuman sound, such a “gigantic and haunting mur­
mur” (as Jean Paulhan says)? But this is simply a defect! The
weakness of a writer who cannot be brief! It is certainly a serious
defect—literature is the first to accuse him of it. But what it
condemns on one side becomes a merit on the other; what it
denounces in the name of the work it admires as an experience,
what seems unreadable, is really the only thing worth being writ­
then. And at the end of everything is fame; beyond, there is oblivion;
farther beyond, anonymous survival as part of a dead culture; even
farther beyond, perseverance in the eternity of the elements. Where
is the end? Where is that death which is the hope of language? But
language is the life that endures death and maintains itself in it.

If we want to restore literature to the movement which allows all
its ambiguities to be grasped, that movement is here: literature, like
ordinary speech, begins with the end, which is the only thing that
allows us to understand. If we are to speak, we must see death, we
must see it behind us. When we speak, we are leaning on a tomb,
and the void of that tomb is what makes language true, but at the
same time void is reality and death becomes being. There is being—
that is to say, a logical and expressible truth—and there is a world,
because we can destroy things and suspend existence. This is why
we can say that there is being because there is nothingness: death is

man's possibility, his chance, it is through death that the future of a
finished world is still there for us; death is man's greatest hope, his
only hope of being man. This is why existence is his only real
dread, as Emmanuel Lévinas has clearly shown:* existence fright­
en him, not because of death, which could put an end to it, but
because it excludes death, because it is still there underneath death,
a presence in the depths of absence, an inexorable day in which all
days rise and set. And there is no question that we are preoccupied
by dying. But why? It is because when we die, we leave behind not
only the world but also death. That is the paradox of the last hour.
Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes
nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us
as our most human quality; it is death only in the world—man
knows death only because he is man, and he is man only because he
is death in the process of becoming. But to die is to shatter the
world; it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of the being; and
so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made
it death. As long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, by
ceasing to be a man I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer capable
of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is:
no longer death but the impossibility of dying.

Certain religions have taken the impossibility of death and called
it immortality. That is, they have tried to “humanize” the very
event which signifies “I cease to be a man.” But it is only the
opposite thrust that makes death impossible: through death I lose
the advantage of being mortal, because I lose the possibility of
being man; to be man beyond death could only have this strange
meaning—to be, in spite of death, still capable of dying, to go on as
though nothing had happened, with death as a horizon and the
same hope—death which would have no outcome beyond a “go on
as though nothing had happened,” etc. This is what other religions
have called the curse of being reborn: you die, but you die badly

* He writes, “Isn't dread in the face of being—horror of being—just as
primordial as dread in the face of death? Isn't fear of being just as primordial as
fear of one's being? Even more primordial, because one could account for the
latter by means of the former” (Existence and Existents).
off again and loses its way again, allowing a sickening physical substance to replace it, something like a walking staircase, a corridor that unfolds ahead—a kind of reason whose infallibility excludes all reasoners, a logic that has become the “logic of things.” Then where is the work? Each moment has the clarity of a beautiful language being spoken, but the work as a whole has the opaque meaning of a thing that is being eaten and that is also eating, that is devouring, being swallowed up, and re-creating itself in a vain effort to change itself into nothing.

Lautréamont is not a true writer of prose? But what is Sade’s style, if it isn’t prose? And does anyone write more clearly than he does? Is there anyone less familiar than he—who grew up in the least poetic century—with the preoccupations of a literature in search of obscurity? And yet in what other work do we hear such an impersonal, inhuman sound, such a “gigantic and haunting murmur” (as Jean Paulhan says)? But this is simply a defect! The weakness of a writer who cannot be brief! It is certainly a serious defect—literature is the first to accuse him of it. But what it condemns on one side becomes a merit on the other; what it denounces in the name of the work it admires as an experience, what seems unreadable, is really the only thing worth being written. And at the end of everything is fame, beyond, there is oblivion; farther beyond, anonymous survival as part of a dead culture; even farther beyond, perseverance in the eternity of the elements. Where is the end? Where is that death which is the hope of language? But language is the life that endures death and maintains itself in it.

If we want to restore literature to the movement which allows all its ambiguities to be grasped, that movement is here: literature, like ordinary speech, begins with the end, which is the only thing that allows us to understand. If we are to speak, we must see death, we must see it behind us. When we speak, we are leaning on a tomb, and the void of that tomb is what makes language true, but at the same time void is reality and death becomes being. There is being—that is to say, a logical and expressive truth—and there is a world, because we can destroy things and suspend existence. This is why we can say that there is being because there is nothingness: death is man’s possibility, his chance, it is through death that the future of a finished world is still there for us; death is man’s greatest hope, his only hope of being man. This is why existence is his only real dread, as Emmanuel Lévinas has clearly shown;* existence frightens him, not because of death, which could put an end to it, but because it excludes death, because it is still there underneath death, a presence in the depths of absence, an inexorable day in which all days rise and set. And there is no question that we are preoccupied by dying. But why? It is because when we die, we leave behind not only the world but also death. That is the paradox of the last hour. Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us as our most human quality; it is death only in the world—man knows death only because he is man, and he is man only because he is death in the process of becoming. But to die is to shatter the world; it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of the being; and so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made it death. As long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, by ceasing to be a man I also cease to be moral, I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death but the impossibility of dying.

Certain religions have taken the impossibility of death and called it immortality. That is, they have tried to “humanize” the very event which signifies “I cease to be a man.” But it is only the opposite thrust that makes death impossible: through death I lose the advantage of being moral, because I lose the possibility of being man; to be man beyond death could only have this strange meaning—to be, in spite of death, still capable of dying, to go on as though nothing had happened, with death as a horizon and the same hope—death which would have no outcome beyond a “go on as though nothing had happened,” etc. This is what other religions have called the curse of being reborn: you die, but you die badly

* He writes, “Isn’t dread in the face of being—horror of being—just as primordial as dread in the face of death? Isn’t fear of being just as primordial as fear for one’s being? Even more primordial, because one could account for the latter by means of the former” (Existence and Existents).
because you have lived badly, you are condemned to live again, and you live again until, having become a man completely, in dying you become a truly blessed man—a man who is really dead. Kafka inherited this idea from the Cabala and Eastern traditions. A man enters the night, but the night ends in awakening, and there he is, an insect. Or else the man dies, but he is actually alive; he goes from city to city, carried along by rivers, recognized by some people, helped by no one, the mistake made by old death snickering at his bedside; his is a strange condition, he has forgotten to die. But another man thinks he is alive, when the fact is, he has forgotten his death, and yet another, knowing he is dead, struggles in vain to die; death is over there, the great unattainable castle, and life was over there, the native land he left in answer to a false summons; now there is nothing to do but to struggle, to work at dying completely, but if you struggle, you are still alive; and everything that brings the goal closer also makes the goal inaccessible.

Kafka did not make this theme the expression of a drama about the next world, but he did try to use it to capture the present fact of our condition. He saw in literature the best way of trying to find a way out for this condition, not only of describing it. This is high praise, but does literature deserve it? It is true that there is powerful trickery in literature, a mysterious bad faith that allows it to play everything both ways and gives the most honest people an unreasonable hope of losing and yet winning at the same time. First of all, literature, too, is working toward the advent of the world; literature is civilization and culture. In this way, it is already uniting two contradictory movements. It is negation, because it drives the inhuman, indeterminate side of things back into nothingness; it defines them, makes them finite, and this is the sense in which literature is really the work of death in the world. But at the same time, after having denied things in their existence, it preserves them in their being; it causes things to have a meaning, and the negation which is death at work is also the advent of meaning, the activity of comprehension. Besides this, literature has a certain privilege: it goes beyond the immediate place and moment, and situates itself at the edge of the world and as if at the end of time, and it is from this position that it speaks about things and concerns itself with men. From this new power, literature apparently gains a superior authority. By revealing to each moment the whole of which it is a part, literature helps it to be aware of the whole that it is not and to become another moment that will be a moment within another whole, and so forth; because of this, literature can be called the greatest ferment in history. But there is one inconvenient consequence: this whole which literature represents is not simply an idea, since it is realized and not formulated abstractly—but it is not realized in an objective way, because what is real in it is not the whole but the particular language of a particular work, which is itself immersed in history; what is more, the whole does not present itself as real but as fictional, that is, precisely as whole, as everything: perspective of the world, grasp of that imaginary point where the world can be seen in its entirety. What we are talking about, then, is a view of the world which realizes itself as unreal using language's peculiar reality. Now, what is the consequence of this? As for the task which is the world, literature is now regarded more as a bother than as a serious help; it is not the result of any true work, since it is not reality but the realization of a point of view which remains unreal; it is foreign to any true culture, because culture is the work of a person changing himself little by little over a period of time, and not the immediate enjoyment of a fictional transformation which dispenses with both time and work.

Spurned by history, literature plays a different game. If it is not really in the world, working to make the world, this is because its lack of being (of intelligible reality) causes it to refer to an existence that is still inhuman. Yes, it recognizes that this is so, that in its nature there is a strange slipping back and forth between being and not being, presence and absence, reality and nonreality. What is a work? Real words and an imaginary story, a world in which everything that happens is borrowed from reality, and this world is inaccessible; characters who are portrayed as living—but we know that their life consists of not living (of remaining a fiction); pure nothingness, then? But the book is there, and we can touch it, we read the words and we cannot change them; is it the nothingness of
because you have lived badly, you are condemned to live again, and
you live again until, having become a man completely, in dying you
become a truly blessed man—a man who is really dead. Kafka
inherited this idea from the Cabala and Eastern traditions. A man
enters the night, but the night ends in awakening, and there he is,
an insect. Or else the man dies, but he is actually alive; he goes from
city to city, carried along by rivers, recognized by some people,
helped by no one, the mistake made by old death snickering at his
bedside; his is a strange condition, he has forgotten to die. But
another man thinks he is alive, when the fact is, he has forgotten his
death, and yet another, knowing he is dead, struggles in vain to die;
death is over there, the great unattainable castle, and life was over
there, the native land he left in answer to a false summons; now
there is nothing to do but to struggle, to work at dying completely;
but if you struggle, you are still alive; and everything that brings the
goal closer also makes the goal inaccessible.

Kafka did not make this theme the expression of a drama about
the next world, but he did try to use it to capture the present fact of
our condition. He saw in literature the best way of trying to find a
way out for this condition, not only of describing it. This is high
praise, but does literature deserve it? It is true that there is powerful
trickery in literature, a mysterious bad faith that allows it to play
everything both ways and gives the most honest people an unreason-
able hope of losing and yet winning at the same time. First of
all, literature, too, is working toward the advent of the world;
literature is civilization and culture. In this way, it is already uniting
two contradictory movements. It is negation, because it drives the
inhuman, indeterminate side of things back into nothingness; it
defines them, makes them finite, and this is the sense in which
literature is really the work of death in the world. But at the same
time, after having denied things in their existence, it preserves
them in their being; it causes things to have a meaning, and the
negation which is death at work is also the advent of meaning, the
activity of comprehension. Besides this, literature has a certain
privilege: it goes beyond the immediate place and moment, and
situates itself at the edge of the world and as if at the end of time,
and it is from this position that it speaks about things and concerns
itself with men. From this new power, literature apparently gains a
superior authority. By revealing to each moment the whole of
which it is a part, literature helps it to be aware of the whole that it
is not and to become another moment that will be a moment
within another whole, and so forth; because of this, literature can
be called the greatest ferment in history. But there is one inconve-
nient consequence: this whole which literature represents is not
simply an idea, since it is realized and not formulated abstractly—
but it is not realized in an objective way, because what is real in it is
not the whole but the particular language of a particular work,
which is itself immersed in history; what is more, the whole does
not present itself as real but as fictional, that is, precisely as whole,
as everything: perspective of the world, grasp of that imaginary
point where the world can be seen in its entirety. What we are
talking about, then, is a view of the world which realizes itself as
unreal using language's peculiar reality. Now, what is the conse-
quence of this? As for the task which is the world, literature is now
regarded more as a bother than as a serious help; it is not the result
of any true work, since it is not reality but the realization of a point
of view which remains unreal; it is foreign to any true culture,
because culture is the work of a person changing himself little by
little over a period of time, and not the immediate enjoyment of a
fictional transformation which dispenses with both time and work.

Spurned by history, literature plays a different game. If it is not
really in the world, working to make the world, this is because its
lack of being (of intelligible reality) causes it to refer to an existence
that is still inhuman. Yes, it recognizes that this is so, that in its
nature there is a strange slipping back and forth between being and
not being, presence and absence, reality and nonreality. What is a
work? Real words and an imaginary story, a world in which everything
that happens is borrowed from reality, and this world is
inaccessible; characters who are portrayed as living—but we know
that their life consists of not living (of remaining a fiction); pure
nothingness, then? But the book is there, and we can touch it, we
read the words and we cannot change them; is it the nothingness of
an idea, then, of something which exists only when understood? But the fiction is not understood, it is experienced through the words with which it is realized, and for me, as I read it or write it, it is more real than many real events, because it is impregnated with all the reality of language and it substitutes itself for my life simply by existing. Literature does not act; but what it does is plunge into this depth of existence which is neither being nor nothingness and where the hope of doing anything is completely eliminated. It is not explanation, and it is not pure comprehension, because the inexplicable emerges in it. And it expresses without expressing, it offers its language to what is murmured in the absence of speech. So literature seems to be allied with the strangeness of that existence which being has rejected and which does not fit into any category. The writer senses that he is in the grasp of an impersonal power that does not let him either live or die: the irresponsibility he cannot surmount becomes the expression of that death without death which awakens him at the edge of nothingness; literary immortality is the very movement by which the nausea of a survival which is not a survival, a death which does not end anything, insinuates itself into the world, a world sapped by crude existence. The writer who writes a work eliminates himself as he writes that work and at the same time affirms himself in it. If he has written it to get rid of himself, it turns out that the work engages him and recalls him to himself, and if he writes it to reveal himself and live in it, he sees that what he has done is nothing, that the greatest work is not as valuable as the most insignificant act, and that his work condemns him to an existence that is not his own existence and to a life that has nothing to do with life. Or again he has written because in the depths of language he heard the work of death as it prepared living beings for the truth of their name: he worked for this nothingness and he himself was a nothingness at work. But as one realizes the void, one creates a work, and the work, born of fidelity to death, is in the end no longer capable of dying; and all it brings to the person who was trying to prepare an unstoried death for himself is the mockery of immortality.

Then where is literature's power? It plays at working in the world, and the world regards its work as a worthless or dangerous game. It opens a path for itself toward the obscurity of existence and does not succeed in pronouncing the "Never more" which would suspend its curse. Then where is its force? Why would a man like Kafka decide that if he had to fall short of his destiny, being a writer was the only way to fall short of it truthfully? Perhaps this is an unintelligible enigma, but if it is, the source of the mystery is literature's right to affix a negative or positive sign indiscriminately to each of its moments and each of its results. A strange right—one linked to the question of ambiguity in general. Why is there ambiguity in the world? Ambiguity is its own answer. We cannot answer it except by rediscovering it in the ambiguity of our answer, and an ambiguous answer is a question about ambiguity. One of the ways it reduces us is by making us want to clear it up, a struggle that is like the struggle against evil Kafka talks about, which ends in evil, "like the struggle with women, which ends in bed."

Literature is language turning into ambiguity. Ordinary language is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak, we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence. But ordinary language limits equivocation. It solidly encloses the absence in a presence, it puts a term to understanding, to the indefinite movement of comprehension; understanding is limited, but misunderstanding is limited, too. In literature, ambiguity is in some sense abandoned to its excesses by the opportunities it finds and exhausted by the extent of the abuses it can commit. It is as though there were a hidden trap here to force ambiguity to reveal its own traps, and as though in surrendering unreservedly to ambiguity, literature were attempting to keep it—out of sight of the world and out of the thought of the world—in a place where it fulfills itself without endangering anything. Here ambiguity struggles with itself. It is not just that each moment of language can become ambiguous and say something different from what it is saying, but that the general meaning of language is unclear: we do not know if it is expressing or representing, if it is a thing or means
an idea, then, of something which exists only when understood? But the fiction is not understood, it is experienced through the words with which it is realized, and for me, as I read it or write it, it is more real than many real events, because it is impregnated with all the reality of language and it substitutes itself for my life simply by existing. Literature does not act; but what it does is plunge into this depth of existence which is neither being nor nothingness and where the hope of doing anything is completely eliminated. It is not explanation, and it is not pure comprehension, because the inexplicable emerges in it. And it expresses without expressing, it offers its language to what is murmured in the absence of speech. So literature seems to be allied with the strangeness of that existence which being has rejected and which does not fit into any category. The writer senses that he is in the grasp of an impersonal power that does not let him either live or die: the irresponsibility he cannot surmount becomes the expression of that death without death which awaits him at the edge of nothingness; literary immortality is the very movement by which the nausea of a survival which is not a survival, a death which does not end anything, insinuates itself into the world, a world sapped by crude existence. The writer who writes a work eliminates himself as he writes that work and at the same time affirms himself in it. If he has written it to get rid of himself, it turns out that the work engages him and recalls him to himself, and if he writes it to reveal himself and live in it, he sees that what he has done is nothing, that the greatest work is not as valuable as the most insignificant act, and that his work condemns him to an existence that is not his own existence and to a life that has nothing to do with life. Or again he has written because in the depths of language he heard the work of death as it prepared living beings for the truth of their name: he worked for this nothingness and he himself was a nothingness at work. But as one realizes the void, one creates a work, and the work, born of fidelity to death, is in the end no longer capable of dying; and all it brings to the person who was trying to prepare an unstoried death for himself is the mockery of immortality.

Then where is literature's power? It plays at working in the world, and the world regards its work as a worthless or dangerous game. It opens a path for itself toward the obscurity of existence and does not succeed in pronouncing the “Never more” which would suspend its curse. Then where is its force? Why would a man like Kafka decide that if he had to fall short of his destiny, being a writer was the only way to fall short of it truthfully? Perhaps this is an unintelligible enigma, but if it is, the source of the mystery is literature's right to affix a negative or positive sign indiscriminately to each of its moments and each of its results. A strange right—one linked to the question of ambiguity in general. Why is there ambiguity in the world? Ambiguity is its own answer. We cannot answer it except by rediscovering it in the ambiguity of our answer, and an ambiguous answer is a question about ambiguity. One of the ways it reduces us is by making us want to clear it up, a struggle that is like the struggle against evil Kafka talks about, which ends in evil, “like the struggle with women, which ends in bed.”

Literature is language turning into ambiguity. Ordinary language is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak, we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence. But ordinary language limits equivocation. It solidly encloses the absence in a presence, it puts a term to misunderstanding, to the indefinite movement of comprehension; understanding is limited, but misunderstanding is limited, too. In literature, ambiguity is in some sense abandoned to its excesses by the opportunities it finds and exhausted by the extent of the abuses it can commit. It is as though there were a hidden trap here to force ambiguity to reveal its own traps, and as though in surrendering unreservedly to ambiguity, literature were attempting to keep it—out of sight of the world and out of the thought of the world—in a place where it fulfills itself without endangering anything. Here ambiguity struggles with itself. It is not just that each moment of language can become ambiguous and say something different from what it is saying, but that the general meaning of language is unclear: we do not know if it is expressing or representing, if it is a thing or means
that thing; if it is there to be forgotten or if it only makes us forget it so that we will see it; if it is transparent because what it says has so little meaning or clear because of the exactness with which it says it, obscure because it says too much, opaque because it says nothing. There is ambiguity everywhere: in its trivial exterior—but what is most frivolous may be the mask of the serious; in its disinterestedness—but behind this disinterestedness lie the forces of the world, and it connives with them without knowing them, or again, ambiguity uses this disinterestedness to safeguard the absolute nature of the values without which action would stop or become mortal; its unreality is therefore both a principle of action and the incapacity to act, in the same way that the fiction in itself is truth and also indifference to truth; in the same way that if it allies itself with morality, it corrupts itself, and if it rejects morality, it still perverts itself; in the same way that it is nothing if it is not its own end, but it cannot have its end in itself, because it is without end, it ends outside itself, in history, etc.

All these reversals from pro to contra—and those described here—undoubtedly have very different causes. We have seen that literature assigns itself irreconcilable tasks. We have seen that in moving from the writer to the reader, from the labor to the finished work, it passes through contradictory moments and can only place itself in the affirmation of all the opposing moments. But all these contradictions, these hostile demands, these divisions and oppositions, so different in origin, kind, and meaning, refer back to an ultimate ambiguity whose strange effect is to attract literature to an unstable point where it can indiscriminately change both its meaning and its sign.

This ultimate vicissitude keeps the work in suspense in such a way that it can choose whether to take on a positive or a negative value and, as though it were pivoting invisibly around an invisible axis, enter the daylight of affirmations or the backlight of negations, without its style, genre, or subject being accountable for the radical transformation. Neither the content of the words nor their form is involved here. Whether the work is obscure or clear, poetry or prose, insignificant or important, whether it speaks of a pebble or of God, there is something in it that does not depend on its qualities and that deep within itself is always in the process of changing the work from the ground up. It is as though in the very heart of literature and language, beyond the visible movements that transform them, a point of instability were reserved, a power to work substantial metamorphoses, a power capable of changing everything about it without changing anything. This instability can appear to be the effect of a disintegrating force, since it can cause the strongest, most forceful work to become a work of unhappiness and ruin, but this disintegration is also a form of construction, if it suddenly causes distress to turn into hope and destruction into an element of the indestructible. How can such imminence of change, present in the depths of language quite apart from the meaning that affects it and the reality of that language, nevertheless be present in that meaning and in that reality? Could it be that the meaning of a word introduces something else into the word along with it, something which, although it protects the precise signification of the word and does not threaten that signification, is capable of completely modifying the meaning and modifying the material value of the word? Could there be a force at once friendly and hostile hidden in the intimacy of speech, a weapon intended to build and to destroy, which would act behind signification rather than upon signification? Do we have to suppose a meaning for the meaning of words that, while determining that signification, also surrounds this determination with an ambiguous indeterminacy that wavers between yes and no?

But we cannot suppose anything: we have questioned this meaning of the meaning of words at length, this meaning which is as much the movement of a word toward its truth as it is its return through the reality of language to the obscure depths of existence; we have questioned this absence by which the thing is annihilated, destroyed in order to become being and idea. It is that life which supports death and maintains itself in it—death, the amazing power of the negative, or freedom, through whose work existence is detached from itself and made significant. Now, nothing can prevent this power—at the very moment it is trying to understand things and, in language, to specify words—nothing can prevent it from continuing to assert itself as continually differing possibility,
that thing; if it is there to be forgotten or if it only makes us forget it so that we will see it; if it is transparent because what it says has so little meaning or clear because of the exactness with which it says it, obscure because it says too much, opaque because it says nothing. There is ambiguity everywhere: in its trivial exterior—but what is most frivolous may be the mask of the serious; in its disinterestedness—but behind this disinterestedness lie the forces of the world, and it connives with them without knowing them, or again, ambiguity uses this disinterestedness to safeguard the absolute nature of the values without which action would stop or become mortal; its unreality is therefore both a principle of action and the incapacity to act, in the same way that the fiction in itself is truth and also indifference to truth; in the same way that if it allies itself with morality, it corrupts itself, and if it rejects morality, it still perverts itself; in the same way that it is nothing if it is not its own end, but it cannot have its end in itself, because it is without end, it ends outside itself, in history, etc.

All these reversals from *pro* to *contra*—and those described here—undoubtedly have very different causes. We have seen that literature assigns itself irreconcilable tasks. We have seen that in moving from the writer to the reader, from the labor to the finished work, it passes through contradictory moments and can only place itself in the affirmation of all the opposing moments. But all these contradictions, these hostile demands, these divisions and oppositions, so different in origin, kind, and meaning, refer back to an ultimate ambiguity whose strange effect is to attract literature to an unstable point where it can indiscriminately change both its meaning and its sign.

This ultimate vicissitude keeps the work in suspense in such a way that it can choose whether to take on a positive or a negative value and, as though it were pivoting invisibly around an invisible axis, enter the daylight of affirmations or the backlight of negations, without its style, genre, or subject being accountable for the radical transformation. Neither the content of the words nor their form is involved here. Whether the work is obscure or clear, poetry or prose, insignificant or important, whether it speaks of a pebble or of God, there is something in it that does not depend on its qualities and that deep within itself is always in the process of changing the work from the ground up. It is as though in the very heart of literature and language, beyond the visible movements that transform them, a point of instability were reserved, a power to work substantial metamorphoses, a power capable of changing everything about it without changing anything. This instability can appear to be the effect of a disintegrating force, since it can cause the strongest, most forceful work to become a work of unhappiness and ruin, but this disintegration is also a form of construction, if it suddenly causes distress to turn into hope and destruction into an element of the indestructible. How can such imminence of change, present in the depths of language quite apart from the meaning that affects it and the reality of that language, nevertheless be present in that meaning and in that reality? Could it be that the meaning of a word introduces something else into the word along with it, something which, although it protects the precise signification of the word and does not threaten that signification, is capable of completely modifying the meaning and modifying the material value of the word? Could there be a force at once friendly and hostile behind the intimacy of speech, a weapon intended to build and to destroy, which would act behind signification rather than upon signification? Do we have to suppose a meaning for the meaning of words that, while determining that signification, also surrounds this determination with an ambiguous indeterminacy that wavers between yes and no?

But we cannot suppose anything: we have questioned this meaning of the meaning of words at length, this meaning which is as much the movement of a word toward its truth as it is its return through the reality of language to the obscure depths of existence; we have questioned this absence by which the thing is annihilated, destroyed in order to become being and idea. It is *that life which supports death and maintains itself in it*—death, the amazing power of the negative, or freedom, through whose work existence is detached from itself and made significant. Now, nothing can prevent this power—at the very moment it is trying to understand things and, in language, to specify words—nothing can prevent it from continuing to assert itself as continually differing possibility,
and nothing can stop it from perpetuating an irreducible *double meaning*, a choice whose terms are covered over with an ambiguity that makes them identical to one another even as it makes them opposite.

If we call this power negation or unreality or death, then presently death, negation, and unreality, at work in the depths of language, will signify the advent of truth in the world, the construction of intelligible being, the formation of meaning. But just as suddenly, the sign changes: meaning no longer represents the marvel of comprehension, but instead refers us to the nothingness of death, and intelligible being signifies only the rejection of existence, and the absolute concern for truth is expressed by an incapacity to act in a real way. Or else death is perceived as a civilizing power which results in a comprehension of being. But at the same time, a death that results in being represents an absurd insanity, the curse of existence—which contains within itself both death and being and is neither being nor death. Death ends in being: this is man's hope and his task, because nothingness itself helps to make the world, nothingness is the creator of the world in man as he works and understands. Death ends in being: this is man's laceration, the source of his unhappy fate, since by man death comes to being and by man meaning rests on nothingness; the only way we can comprehend is by denying ourselves existence, by making death *possible*, by contaminating what we comprehend with the nothingness of death, so that if we emerge from being, we fall outside the possibility of death, and the way out becomes the disappearance of every way out.

This original double meaning, which lies deep inside every word like a condemnation that is still unknown and a happiness that is still invisible, is the source of literature, because literature is the form in which this double meaning has chosen to show itself behind the meaning and value of words, and the question it asks is the question asked by literature.

*Translated by Lydia Davis*