

profound indeterminacy of daily events. All it has to do is enrich the main event, filmed according to all the laws of verisimilitude, with a variety of marginal annotations, with rapid inquiries into the surrounding reality, with all sorts of images unrelated to the primary action but relevant precisely because of their unrelatedness, given the new perspectives, the new directions, and the new possibilities they propose for the same set of events.

Live TV might then have a rather interesting pedagogical effect: it could give the viewer the feeling, however vague, that life—that even he himself—is not confined to the story he so eagerly follows. These digressive annotations would then jolt the viewer out of the hypnotic spell woven by the plot, and, by distancing him from it, would force him to judge, or at least to question, the persuasiveness of what he sees on the screen.

## VI

## Form as Social Commitment

A famous columnist who's always keenly aware of what is "in" and what is "out" recently warned her readers to beware of the word "alienation," by now quite outdated and vulgarized, good only for readers of best-sellers or for some contemporary Bouvards and Pecuchets. Of course, philosophers ought not to care whether the technical terms they use are "in" or "out"; on the other hand, why a given word should suddenly become terribly trendy and then, quite as suddenly, lapse into disuse is certainly part of their concerns. Why did the term "alienation" become so popular at the beginning of the 1960s, so long after its first appearance? Might one say that the way in which it has been used and abused is in itself one of the most egregious yet unrecognized instances of alienation in the history of our civilization?

First of all, let's look at the term's origins and correct usage. Its meaning changes depending on whether it is followed by the preposition "from" (as is generally the case in English) or the preposition "in" or "to." Philosophical tradition prefers the latter usage as the more correct translation of the German word *Entfremdung*, which implies renouncing oneself for the sake of something else, abandoning oneself to some extraneous power, becoming "other" in something outside oneself, therefore ceasing to be an agent in order to be acted upon. "Alienation from," in the sense of "estrangement from" something, corresponds instead to the German *Verfremdung* and means something quite different.

In its daily use, however, the term has acquired yet another meaning which implies that the something that is acting upon us, and on which we depend, is something totally extraneous to us, a hostile power that has nothing to do with us, an evil will that has subjugated us despite all our efforts and that someday we may be

able to destroy, or at least reject, since we are ourselves and it is an "other," substantially different from what we are.

Of course, everyone is free to build a personal myth in which the word "alienation" has this particular meaning. But this is certainly not the meaning it had either for Hegel or for Marx. According to Hegel, man alienates himself by objectivizing himself in the aim of his work or his actions. In other words, he alienates himself *in* the world of things and of social relationships because he has constructed it according to the laws of subsistence and development that he himself must adjust to and respect. Marx, on the other hand, reproached Hegel for not making a clear distinction between objectification (*Entausserung*) and alienation (*Entfremdung*). In the first case, man turns himself into a thing; he expresses himself in the world through his creations, thus constructing the world to which he then commits himself. But when the mechanism of this world begins to get the upper hand—when man suddenly becomes unable to recognize it as his own creation, unable to use for his own purposes the things he has produced, and instead ends up serving their purposes (which he might identify with the purposes of other men)—then he finds himself alienated; it is his creations that henceforth tell him what to do, what to feel, and what to become. The stronger the alienation, the deeper man's belief that he is still in control (whereas, in fact, he is being controlled) and that the situation in which he lives is the best of all possible worlds.

For Marx, objectification is a substantially positive and indispensable process, whereas alienation is a historically engendered situation, a situation which, therefore, can find a historical solution—in communism.

In other words, according to Marx, Hegel's problem lies in his having reduced the question of alienation to a process of the mind: consciousness alienates itself in its object and only upon recognizing itself in the object discovers its own effectuality. But this knowledge automatically entails the negation of the object, for the moment consciousness recognizes the object, it gets rid of its alienation by negating the object itself. "Objectivity as such," Marx says of Hegel, "is considered to be an alien condition not fitting man's nature and self-consciousness. Thus, the reappropriation of the objective essence of man, which was produced as something alien and determined by alienation, not only implies the transcendence of

alienation, but also of objectivity. This means that man is regarded as a non-objective, spiritual being . . . The appropriation of the alienated objective essence or the supersession of objectivity regarded as alienation . . . means for Hegel at the same time, or even principally, the supersession of objectivity, since what offends self-consciousness in alienation is not the determinate character of the object but its objective character."

So the consciousness that constitutes itself as self-consciousness not only would eliminate its state of alienation to the object, but, in its furious desire for the absolute, would also kill the object by taking it back within itself. It is not surprising that Marx, interpreting Hegel in this fashion, had to react by asserting that the object created by human activity *exists* just as much as the reality of nature, technology, and society. Hegel's achievement was to define the range and function of human labor; the object of this labor could not be denied. However self-aware one might become and however conscious of the freedom one must acquire in relation to this object. Work must be seen not as an activity of the spirit (so that the opposition between consciousness and the object of its knowledge may be resolved in an ideal play of assertions and negations) but rather as the externalization of the powers of man, who must now deal concretely with what he has created. If man wants to "resume his own alienated essence into himself," he cannot suppress the object (through a spiritual dialectic); rather, he will have to act practically in order to suppress alienation—that is, in order to change the conditions that have brought about this painful and scandalous separation between himself and the object he has created.

The nature of this separation is both social and economic: the capitalistic mode of production allows for the fact that man's work may concretize itself in an object that is fundamentally independent from its producer, so that the more objects the producer produces, the more depleted he becomes. The situation can be summed up as follows: the worker depends on the things he produces; then he inevitably falls under the dominion of the money that represents them; after this, the more he goes on producing the more he becomes like the merchandise he produces. In other words, "he is no longer the product of his own work; so the larger this product, the lesser he will be."

Solution: a system of collective production in which the worker

is no longer working for others but working for himself and his own kin, and thus feels that what he makes is his own product and that he is one with it.

But then, how could Hegel have so easily confused objectification and alienation, as Marx says he did?

From the vantage point of a later historical and industrial reality, we can now reconsider the whole question of alienation in a different light. Hegel did not make any distinction between the two forms of alienation because, in fact, the moment man objectifies himself in the works he has created, and in the nature he has modified, he produces an inevitable tension. The two poles of such a tension are, on the one hand, his domination of the object, and, on the other, his total dissolution in the object, his total surrender to it. This is a dialectic balance that is based on a constant struggle between the negation of what is asserted and the assertion of what is denied. Thus, alienation would seem to be an integral part of every relationship one establishes with others and with things, whether this be in love, in society, or within an industrial structure.' The question of alienation would then become (to put it in Hegelian terms, at least metaphorically) "the question of a human self-consciousness, which, unable to conceive of itself as a separate 'cogito,' can find itself only in the world that it itself constructs, and in the other Ts it recognizes, and, at times, misconstrues. But, this way of finding oneself in the other, this objectification, is always more or less a form of alienation, *at once a loss of oneself and a recovery of oneself.*" Obviously, if the lesson of Hegel sounds much more concrete today than it did to Marx it is because our culture has had the advantage of rereading him through Marx.

At this point, however, it would be somewhat awkward if, after rereading Hegel through Marx, we were to skip Marx and return to Hegel in order to say that since alienation is inevitably a fundamental characteristic of one's relationship with objects and nature, it would be useless to try to eliminate it. Just as it would be awkward to accept alienation as an "existential situation," since we know how ambiguous such an expression can be in the light of a negative existentialism, according to which any attempt to overcome the "structure of existence" would simply throw us back onto it.

Our argument should instead proceed in a different direction.

The kind of alienation Marx speaks of is, on the one hand, the same as that which is studied by political economy, namely that which derives from the use that a society based on private property makes of the objects produced by a worker. (Because he produces for others, he makes himself ugly by producing beauty and mechanizes himself by producing machines.) On the other hand, it is the sort of alienation that is intrinsic to the very process of production. This second kind of alienation is fostered by the worker, who fails to see his work as an end in itself and instead considers it as *a* means of survival in which he fails to recognize himself (since neither the product nor the work belongs to him).

Since these two types of alienation are necessary for the survival of a particular society, it is conceivable, following *a* Marxist line of reasoning, that a radical modification of the system of relationships on which that society is based would eliminate alienation.

On the other hand, even though a modification of society may liberate man from this sort of subjection (and give him back the object he produces as well as the productive work he has accomplished both for himself and the collectivity), the constant tension characteristic of his alienation "in" the object would remain (this is where Hegel contributes to a greater understanding of the problem), since the object the worker has produced is constantly threatening to control him. This sort of alienation could indeed be perceived as an existential structure or, if we prefer, as the problem that confronts every subject who, having produced an object, turns to it with the intent either to use it or, simply, to consider it. My remarks here will concentrate on this particular kind of alienation—the one that follows every act of objectification—since I believe that this problem has its own characteristics and that it is part of the relationship between man and the world that surrounds him. Of course, a Marxist point of view could easily maintain that this problem would be confronted with greater freedom and awareness in a society that has eliminated economic alienation. But even in this case, the problem would retain most of its urgency.'

As defined here, alienation can be eliminated through both action and awareness, but not forever. If we see alienation even in the relationship between two lovers (since each of them inevitably ends up conforming to the image of the other), then we cannot possibly contemplate a civilization in which the collective sharing of the

means of production will completely eliminate alienation from the dialectic at the basis of life and of every human relationship.

At this point, however, alienation is no longer confined to a particular social structure; rather, it extends to every relationship between man and man, man and object, man and society, man and myth, man and language. As such, it not only serves to explain all those economic relationships which, because of their hold on us, assume the appearance of psychological phenomena, but must also be seen as a form of psychological and physiological behavior whose effect on our personality is so pervasive as to manifest itself in all our social relationships. Alienation will then appear as a phenomenon which, under certain circumstances, goes from the structure of human groups to the most private mental behavior, and under other circumstances, from individual mental behavior to the structure of human groups. The very fact that we live, work, produce, and form relationships means that we exist *in* alienation.

Is there any hope for remission? Not really; neither is it possible to eliminate the negative pole of this tension. This is why, every time we try to describe an alienating situation, just when we think we have identified it *we* discover that we don't know how to get out of it. Every solution we come up with is merely a reiteration of the same problem, even though at a different level. This situation—which, in a moment of pessimism, we could define as irreducibly paradoxical, "absurd"—is, in fact only dialectic: it cannot be solved by simply eliminating one of its poles. The absurd is nothing but a dialectic situation as perceived by a masochist.'

We produce a machine, and then the machine oppresses us with an inhuman reality that renders the relationship we have with it, and with the world through it, disagreeable. Industrial design seems to have found a solution to this problem: it fuses beauty with utility and gives us a humanized machine, a machine cut to human size—the blender, the knife, or the typewriter that advertises its capacities in a pleasant way and invites us to touch it, stroke it, use it. Man could thus be harmoniously assimilated to his function and to the instrument that allows its fulfillment. But this optimistic solution does not satisfy the moralist or the social critic: it is just another form of oppression on the part of an industrial power which, by rendering our relationship to things and the world more pleasant, makes us forget that in fact we remain slaves. A paradoxical

alternative project would be to devise instruments that would make our work as irksome as possible, so that we would never for a second forget that what we are producing is never going to be ours. Such an alternative, however, sounds more like the dream of a madman than like a viable solution. Let's for a moment imagine that these objects are used by people who, instead of working for some extraneous power, work for themselves and the collectivity. Would this better justify the object that tries to integrate form and function in a harmonious way? Not really, since in this case the users will be working as if in a trance, not for a common profit but rather in total surrender to the charm of the object. They would use the object without realizing that they are used by it. Thus, the latest car model can often become a mythic image capable of diverting all our moral energy and of causing us to lose ourselves in the self-satisfied possession of something that is nothing more than a substitute. Nor would the situation change in the instance of a perfectly planned collectivist society in which each member worked to provide himself and his fellow citizens with the latest car model: the contemplation of a pleasing form would ease our integration into our work, and thus it would stifle our moral energy and prevent us from pursuing any goal.

Of course, the dream of a more humane society is also the dream of a society in which everybody can work for the common good: to provide more medicines, more books, and more cars. But even this would not be enough to eliminate alienation. As proof, we have the parallel experiences of the West Coast beatniks and of the "individualist" poets who protest in Mayakovsky Square.

Though intellectuals are always ineluctably drawn to support those who protest, in this particular instance it would be more reasonable to assert that both the beatniks and Yevtushenko are wrong—even though, historically speaking, they fulfill their dialectic function.

They are wrong because their protest often reduces salvation to the idle contemplation of one's own inner void; to them, even the merest search for a remedy is a form of complicity with the alienating situation. On the contrary, the only possible salvation demands an active and practical involvement with the situation. Man works, produces a world of objects, and inevitably alienates himself to them. But then he rids himself of his alienation by accepting

those objects, by committing himself to them, and, instead of annihilating them, by negating them in the name of transformation, aware that at every transformation he will again find himself confronting the same dialectic situation, the same risk of surrendering to the new, transformed reality. What alternative could be more humane and positive than this?

To paraphrase Hegel, man cannot remain locked up in himself, in the temple of his own interiority: he must externalize himself in his work and, by so doing, alienate himself in it. For if he chooses instead to withdraw into himself and to cultivate his own purity and spiritual independence, he will find not salvation but annihilation. He cannot transcend alienation by refusing to compromise himself in the objective situation that emerges out of his work. This situation is the very condition of our humanity. The figure of consciousness that refuses this sort of compromise is that of the "beautiful soul." But what happens to the "beautiful soul"?

"When clarified to this degree of transparency, consciousness exists in its poorest form . . . It lacks force to externalize itself, the power to make itself a thing, and endure existence. It lives in dread of staining the radiance of its inner being by action and existence. And to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with actuality, and steadfastly perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence to renounce a self which is pared away to the last point of abstraction, and to give itself substantial existence, or, in other words, to transform its thought into being, and commit itself to absolute distinction [that between thought and being]. The hollow object, which it produces, now fills it, therefore, with the feeling of emptiness . . . In this transparent purity of its moments it becomes a sorrow-laden 'beautiful soul,' as it is called; its light dims and dies within it, and it vanishes as a shapeless vapour dissolving into thin air . . . The 'beautiful soul,' then, has no concrete reality; it subsists in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity felt by this self to externalize itself and turn into something actual; it exists in the immediacy of this rooted and fixed opposition . . . Thus the 'beautiful soul,' being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is unhinged, disordered, and runs to madness, wastes itself in yearning, and pines away in consumption."<sup>6</sup>

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In passing, we should note that the dialectic alternative to the "beautiful soul" is the subject's joyful dissolution in the object. Is there a chance of salvation between these two forms of self-destruction?

Today, the dead end of the "beautiful soul" is again proposed (not from a Marxist but from a traditionalist standpoint) by Elemire Zolla in his criticism of mass society: not only does he refute the objective situation (the combination "modern civilization-industrial reality-mass culture-elite culture" that expresses man's situation in an industrial society), but he also proposes a total withdrawal from it by condemning all collective action and by advocating, instead, the contemplation of a tabula rasa that the social critic has himself created with his global refusal.

Zolla maintains that "thought cannot provide remedies, but must understand where things really stand," and that "to understand does not mean to accept." I agree with Zolla when he says that thought is not supposed to provide remedies, but he is very unclear about the true nature of this sort of understanding. In fact, it would seem that his "understanding" is very close to the nihilistic knowledge of the "beautiful soul," which, in order to know itself, has to destroy the object in which it always risks losing itself. According to Zolla, it is important to "understand" the object without becoming implicated in it, whereas in fact, in order to understand the object one *must* implicate oneself in it. The object will thus be understood not as something that must be absolutely denied but rather as something that still bears the traces of the human purpose for which it was produced. Only when the object is understood in these terms, as well as in its negative aspects, will we be free from it. Or rather, our knowledge will be the basis for a free and freeing process. But, from the very start, the object should not be perceived as hostile and extraneous, since in fact we *are* the object, since it is our reflection and bears our mark. To know it means to know who we are. So why should this process of knowledge be totally devoid of charity and hope?

Let me cite an example. In the first pages of his novel *Cecilia*, Zolla describes the physical—indeed, erotic—relationship between his heroine and her car. Driving barefoot, she feels its vibrations in all her muscles, she knows it as one knows a lover, and she responds to its elasticity and its movements with her own body. Cecilia is a

perfect example of the human being who is possessed by a thing—and what is more, by an evil "thing," since cars are later in the novel compared to "swollen ticks," "insects bereft of the sepulchral charm of the hard shell, clumsy and sad." To the reader, Cecilia becomes the stereotype of alienated humanity, and yet . . . to what extent is her relationship with her car alienating?

In fact, most drivers would seem to have a similar relationship with their cars. The most important condition for driving is that we use our foot not only to control the mechanism but also to keep in touch with it; through our foot, we feel the car as part of our own body, so that we know when it is time to change gear, to slow down, to idle, without having to resort to the abstract mediation of the tachometer. Only by lending our body to the car, by extending the range of our sensibility, can we use it humanly: the only way we can humanize a machine is by mechanizing ourselves.

Zolla would say that this is precisely the conclusion he was driving at—namely that alienation is so diffused that even an intellectual could not escape it; far from being simply an epiphenomenon that affects only some deranged natures, it is the symptom of the general and irreversible impoverishment of modern society. Zolla forgets that this kind of relationship (the extension of our body into the object we touch, the humanization of the object and the objectification of ourselves) has existed since the dawn of history, since one of our ancestors invented the flintstone and constructed it so that it would fit the palm of his hand, so that its vibration (during use) would be felt through the nerves of the hand and extend their sensibility, so as to eliminate all distinction between it and the hand that held it.

From the very beginning of time, the ability to extend one's corporeality (and therefore to alter one's own natural dimensions) has been the very condition of *homo faber*. To consider such a situation as a degradation of human nature implies that nature and man are not one and the same thing. It implies an inability to accept the idea that nature exists in relation to man, is defined, extended, and modified in and by man; just as man is one particular expression of nature, an active, modifying expression who distinguishes himself from his environment precisely because of his capacity to act upon it and to define it—a capacity that gives him the right to say "I."

The only difference between Cecilia and the inventor of the flintstone lies in the complexities of their respective actions, which, otherwise, are structurally very similar. Cecilia is like the caveman who, having seized his tool, starts using it frantically, to crack the nuts he has gathered, to beat the earth on which he is kneeling, until he loses himself so entirely in his savage actions that he forgets why he seized the object in the first place (just as, at certain orgiastic moments, a drummer ceases to play the drums and is himself played by them).

There is an *ante quern* limit; that is, up to this limit, letting a car possess us is a sign of sanity and the only way in which we can really possess the car: to be unable to sense that there is such a limit, and that it is possible to reach it, means that we don't understand the object and therefore destroy it. This is what the "beautiful soul" does, thereby losing itself in its own negations. There is also a *post quem* limit, which is where morbidity begins. And there is a way of understanding the object, the experience we have of it, and the use we make of it, which in its sheer optimism risks making us forget the presence of a limit, the constant danger of alienation.

At the opposite extreme of the beautiful soul's refusal, we find Dewey's philosophy.

Dewey believes in the integration of man and nature, in the realization of a perfect experience, a situation in which the individual, his action, the context in which he acts, and the instrument he uses are so fully integrated that they exude a feeling of harmony and fulfillment. Such a form of integration has all the aspects of a positive situation (and, indeed, Dewey understands it also as a perfect example of aesthetic appreciation), but it can also define a state in which total alienation is perversely accepted and appreciated. "Every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives. A man does something; he lifts, let us say, a stone. In consequence, he undergoes, suffers something: the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing. The stone is too heavy and too angular, not solid enough; or else the properties undergone show it is fit for the use for which it is intended. The process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close . . . [The] interaction of the two constitutes the total experience."

rience that is had, and the close which completes it is the institution of a felt harmony."

It is easy to see how this particular notion of experience could also define, albeit in an absolutely positive way, a typical instance of alienation, such as the relationship between Cecilia and her car. The tragic suspicion that a relationship with an object may fail precisely because it succeeds too much is absent from Dewey's philosophy. For Dewey, an experience can fail (that is, fail to be a full-fledged experience) only when between the person and the object there is a polarity that cannot be resolved by integration; when there is integration there is experience, and an experience can only be positive. Dewey would see Cecilia's relationship with her car as good simply because it is based on total integration, and is expressive of a harmony in which all the original polarities are combined.

Thus, we have identified two extreme attitudes toward the recurring and ineluctable possibility of alienation present in all our relationships with things and others: the pessimistic attitude, which destroys the object (or rejects it as evil) for fear of being implicated in it, and the optimistic attitude, according to which integration with the object is the only positive aspect of a relationship.

The availability to the world characteristic of the second attitude is fundamental, because it allows us to commit ourselves to the world and to act in it. But the fear that accompanies our every dealing with the world, and the awareness that our adjustment could turn out to be a failure, are also essential to the welfare of the relationship.

In my interaction with my car, in order to keep the right dialectic balance I need only ensure that my operational projects always remain more important to me than the biological harmony I may attain with the engine. For so long as I know what I am doing with the car, what I want from it, and what it allows me to do, I will not risk falling under its spell. The amount of time during which I will let it take over and, as it were, drive me, will be reasonably balanced by the rest of my day and by the fact that, even as I allow myself to be led by it through intersections and traffic lights, I will never be totally absorbed by it, but rather will use it as a sort of sonic or rhythmic background to my thoughts. (This, of course, will also involve a dialectic between the rhythm of my thoughts and the movement of the car: just as my adjustment to the car will affect

my thoughts, so my thoughts will influence my relationship with my car. A sudden intuition may translate into a muscular spasm, an increased pressure on the accelerator, and therefore a variation in speed and in the hypnotic rhythm that could easily have turned me into an instrument of the car. On the other hand, why linger on the reciprocal relationship between the psychological and the physiological when Joyce has already told us everything there is to say about it in his description of Bloom reading on the toilet?)

Once I have become aware of this polarity I will be able to invent a number of "ascetic" stratagems to safeguard my freedom while implicating myself in the object, the last and most banal of which would be to mistreat the car, keep it dirty, deliberately disregard its maintenance, abuse the engine—in other words, do everything in my power to avoid being totally integrated with it. I would thus avoid *Entfremdung* by means of *Verfremdung*, escape alienation through estrangement—a technique similar to Brecht's, who, to prevent his audience from being hypnotized by the events in his plays, demands that the lights be on at all times and that the public be allowed to smoke.

All this should cast some light on a number of procedures. Take, for instance, some lines by Cendrars which Zolla considers a "tragic example of macabre taste":

Toutes les femmes que j'ai rencontrées se dressent aux  
horizons  
Avec les gestes piteux et les regards tristes des sémaphores  
sous la pluie.

All the women I have met stand up against the horizon  
With the pathetic gestures and sad faces of semaphores under  
the rain.

We could justly see these lines as a poetic attempt to humanize an aspect of the technological landscape which otherwise would have remained totally alien to us; as a way of rescuing a technical tool from its daily function by lending it a symbolic value; as a new way of dealing with feelings, without resorting to worn out "poetic images" but, rather, by trying to introduce the imagination to new responses. In other words, we could read them as an attempt to recognize the object, to understand it, to see what space it occupies in our lives, and, having done all this, to see how we can use it for

our own ends, however metaphoric, without having to submit to it. What Zolla sees as macabre has nothing to do with the semaphore, or with any other luminous signal, but it may have something to do with the despair and the squalor of lost loves evoked by Cendrars. In any case, the poem has done its job: it has given new form to an old formula and has offered us the possibility of a new landscape.

The question now becomes: Why do we see the situation of the car driver as more alienating than that of the caveman? Why do we resent the humanization of a semaphore and not that of Achilles' shield? (And we should not forget that the latter is described in the *Iliad* in great detail, including the "industrial" process that produced it, an aspect that must have shocked intellectuals in Homer's day.) Why do we see alienation in the symbiotic relationship that joins a driver to his car and not in the one that joins a rider to his horse when, in both cases, the corporeality of the person is extended into that of the vehicle?

Obviously because nowadays, in our technological civilization, objects have become so pervasive, so sophisticated, so autonomous that we feel threatened by them. The fact that their forms have tended to become less and less anthropomorphic certainly contributes to their otherness. But there is another reason: between the caveman and his tool there was direct contact, an immediate relationship in which the only risk involved was that of total integration between the manipulator and the manipulated object. The car, however, does not simply alienate its driver to itself; it also alienates him to the system of laws that governs the highways, to the race for prestige (the ambition of possessing a new model, a particular accessory, more horsepower), to a market, to a world of competition in which the individual must lose himself in order to acquire the car. In other words, alienation is a chronic condition of human existence at all levels, but it has become particularly prominent in our modern industrial society, as Marx clearly foresaw in his economic analyses.

To modern man, alienation is as much a given as weightlessness is to an astronaut: it is a situation in which we have to learn how to move, how to acquire new autonomy, and how to devise new ways of being free.

We have to realize that we cannot live without an accelerator, and

that maybe we would be unable to love without thinking of semaphores. There are still people who think we can speak of love without referring to traffic lights. One of these is the man who writes the lyrics for Liberate. He has been able to elude the inhuman reality of machines: his universe still revolves around the very human concepts of "heart," "love," and "mother." But the moralist in the know is aware of what lies behind such a *flatus vocis*: a world of petrified values that is used to fool the public. By accepting certain linguistic expressions, the lyricist has alienated himself and his public to something that manifests itself as an obsolete linguistic form.

With this last observation, the discussion has moved from the examination of a direct, real relationship with a situation, to that of the forms through which one organizes one's analysis of the situation. How does alienation manifest itself at the level of art or of pseudo-art forms?

Since I have decided here to use "alienation" in its broadest sense, my argument on this subject will develop along two different, if converging, lines.

First of all, one could speak of the sort of alienation that occurs within a formal system, and which could be more aptly defined as a dialectic between invention and manner, between freedom and formal restrictions. Let's, for instance, consider the system of rhyme.

Rhyme, as such, was elaborated according to a number of stylistic patterns and conventions, not out of masochism but because it was generally assumed that only discipline could stimulate invention and force one to choose the association of sounds that would be most agreeable to the ear. Thanks to these conventions, the poet is no longer the victim or the prisoner of his enthusiasms and emotions: the rules of rhyme restrain him but at the same time liberate him, the way an Ace bandage restrains the movement of an ankle or a knee while allowing the runner to run without fearing a torn ligament. And yet, as soon as we accept a convention we find ourselves alienated in it: the second line is in part determined by the rhyme of the first one. The more a certain practice asserts itself, and the more it pushes us to contemplate creative alternatives, the more it imprisons us. The use of rhyme will result in a dictionary of rhymes, which will start as a compendium of possible rhymes



and end up as a catalogue of common rhymes. So, after a while, a poet will inevitably be more and more alienated in the rhymes he or she uses. A typical example of formal alienation is that of the writer of popular song lyrics who is so conditioned by a certain convention that the moment he comes up with the word "remember," he'll conjure up the image of a sad "September." He is not only alienated to rhyme as a system of possible phonetic concordances; he is also alienated to rhyme as a means of producing the desired effect—that is, of satisfying the demands of the consumer. On the one hand, he is alienated to the linguistic system, and, on the other, to the system of predictable reactions that characterizes his public (not to mention the system of commercial relationships in which the only things that sell are those that satisfy certain expectations).

But even the great poet is conditioned by such systems, even when he decides to pay absolutely no heed to the expectations of the public. The statistical probabilities of finding an unusual rhyme for the word "remember" are fairly limited. As a result, he is either restricted in his rhyming or in his themes, or in both. He will have to avoid using the word "remember" at the end of a line. An artistic achievement requires such a rich interpenetration of sound and sense that the moment the poet uses a sound that has no semantic resonance in an audience whose sensibility responds only to habit, the form he proposes will have very little (if any) power of communication. On the other hand, he will always have the possibility of resorting to an unusual language, a peculiar rhyme pattern, and this will, in turn, determine his themes and the association of his ideas. Even here, he will be acted upon by a situation, but his awareness of it and of his alienation will allow him to turn it to his advantage, to transform it into a means to freedom. Take Montale's unexpected rhymes, for instance: in his poetry, the alienation of a strained dialectic tension has been resolved into a prime example of invention and poetic freedom. Yet every particular solution can, and generally does, become the basis for a new alienating situation. All of Montale's imitators are perfect examples of this: their lack of imagination is the sure sign of their alienation to a particular form (not their own) that determines their actions without allowing them the slightest chance of being original or free.

But this example is much too simple to explain such a complex

situation. In the case of rhyme, the dialectic between invention and imitation manifests itself only at the level of a literary convention that can remain marginal and not affect all the structures of a language. Let's therefore shift our attention to a problem that is more pertinent to contemporary culture.

The tonal system has governed the development of music from the Renaissance to our own day: as a system, and an acquired system at that (nobody believes any longer that tonality is a "natural" fact), the role of the tonal system in music is very similar to that played by rhyme in poetry. The tonal musician composes his pieces by obeying a system he is at odds with. Whenever a symphony concludes triumphantly by insisting on the tonic, the musician has let the system act on its own, since he could do nothing to elude the convention on which it was based. But within this convention, the great musician can always invent new ways to repropose the system.

There are times, however, when a musician feels compelled to move out of the system—Debussy, for instance, does it by using the "hexatonic" scale. He decides to move out of the system because he senses that the tonal grammar forces him to say things he does not want to say. Schonberg breaks definitely with the old system and elaborates a new one. Stravinsky, in contrast, accepts it, but only during a particular phase of his production, and in the only possible way: by parodying it—that is, by questioning it even as he glorifies it.

This revolt against the tonal system, however, concerns more than the dialectic between invention and manner. One does not leave a system merely because its conventions have become too rigid and its web of inventive possibilities has been exhausted. In other words, one does not reject a system merely because one cannot escape the sterile duet "remember/September." The musician refuses the tonal system because its structure mirrors or embodies a world view.

It has been repeatedly said that tonal music is a system in which, once a given tonality has been chosen, the whole composition is articulated through a series of crises and dilations deliberately provoked in order to reestablish, by the final reconfirmation of the tonic, a state of peace and harmony. The final repose is all the more enjoyable the longer it has been delayed. Many people have also

maintained that this type of formal habit has its roots in a society based on respect for an immutable order of things; in other words, tonal music is merely another way of reiterating the basic attitude of an entire educational system at both a social and a theoretical level." Obviously, to postulate such a perfect reflective relationship between a social structure and the structure of a musical language may appear a hasty generalization; yet it is not by chance that, in our day, tonal music has become the music of an occasional community of people, brought together by the ritual of going to concerts—people who like to express their aesthetic sensibility at a particular time of the day, wearing a particular kind of clothing, and who pay the price of admission in order to undergo an experience of crisis and resolution, so that when they leave the "temple" they will feel fully purged by the cathartic effect of art.

A musician becomes aware of the crisis of the tonal system the moment he realizes that certain sonic frequencies have so long been identified with particular psychological states that the listener can no longer hear them without instinctively relating them to a particular moral, ideological, or social reality, to a particular vision of the world. When, in order to escape this dead end, the avant-garde musician finds a new language, a new system of sonic relationships, a new musical form that few people are ready to recognize as such, he condemns himself to noncommunication, to some sort of aristocratic distance. But he does it on purpose, to express his refusal of a system of communication that guarantees him an audience if, and only if, he is willing to submit to an obsolete value system.

So, the avant-garde musician rejects the tonal system not only because it alienates him to a conventional system of musical laws, but also because it alienates him to a social ethics and to a given vision of the world. Of course, the moment he breaks away from the accepted system of communication and renounces its advantages, he will inevitably appear to be involved in an antihuman activity, whereas in fact he has engaged in it in order to avoid mystifying and deceiving his public. By rejecting a musical model, the avant-garde musician actually rejects (more or less consciously) a social model. But it would be wrong to assume that this double rejection involves no affirmation.

The musical system that the avant-garde musician rejects com-

municates only in appearance. In fact, it is exhausted, dried out. It can no longer surprise anyone, since it can produce only clichés. It has become Muzak, or the average popular song, the usual triptych of loss that sees memory fade at an autumnal hearth—"remember," "November," "ember." The situation evoked is sad, depressing; yet cast in those familiar images, it no longer evokes any emotion. We have encountered it too often. It has lost all meaning and has become merely a refrain, a sort of lullabye. Rather than impressing us with the melancholy it depicts, it simply reconfirms all our false assumptions. It tells us that the universe we live in is still as orderly and dependable as it used to be—which, of course, is far from true. Our universe is in full crisis. The order of words no longer corresponds to the order of things: whereas the former still insists on following a traditional system, the latter seems to be mostly characterized by disorder and discontinuity, or so science tells us. Our feelings and emotions have been frozen into stereotypical expressions that have nothing to do with our reality. Social laws still rest on orderly systems that hardly reflect the social instability of our time. In other words, language offers us a representation of the phenomenal world that has nothing to do with the one we encounter on a daily basis. In fact, our world is quite different from the orderly, coherent universe our language still promotes, and much much closer to the dislocated, fragmented vision presented by the avant-garde artist in rupture with the established system.

The artist who protests through form acts on two levels. On one, he rejects a formal system but does not obliterate it; rather, he transforms it from within by alienating himself in it and by exploiting its self-destructive tendencies. On the other, he shows his acceptance of the world as it is, in full crisis, by formulating a new grammar that rests not on a system of organization but on an assumption of disorder. And this is one way in which he implicates himself in the world in which he lives, for the new language he thinks he has invented has instead been suggested to him by his very existential situation. He has no choice, since his only alternative would be to ignore the existence of a crisis, to deny it by continuing to rely on the very systems of order that have caused it. Were he to follow this direction, he would be a mystifier, since he would deliberately lead his audience to believe that beyond their disordered reality there is another, ideal situation that allows him to

judge the actual state of affairs. In other words, he would lead them to trust in the orderly world expressed by their orderly language.

Though it is commonly believed that avant-garde artists are out of touch with the human community in which they live, and that traditional art remains in close contact with it, the opposite is true. In fact, only avant-garde artists are capable of establishing a meaningful relationship with the world in which they live.'

By now it should be fairly obvious why the formal structures of contemporary art keep challenging our language as well as other traditional systems. If it is at all possible to speak of the emergence of the open work in painting as well as in poetry, in cinema as well as in theater, it is because certain artists acknowledge the new vision of both the physical and psychological universes proposed by contemporary science, and realize that they can no longer speak of this world in the same formal terms that were used to speak of an orderly cosmos.

At this point, however, the critic of contemporary poetics might suspect that such undue attention to formal structures means contemporary art is much more interested in abstractions and abstract speculations than in man. This misunderstanding would be merely another expression of the belief that art can speak of man only in a traditional form—which essentially means that art can speak only of yesterday's man. To speak of today's man, however, art has no choice but to break away from all the established formal systems, since its main way of speaking is as *form*. In other words—and this amounts to an aesthetic principle—the only meaningful way in which art can speak of man and his world is by organizing its forms in a particular way and not by making pronouncements with them. Form must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking. A few years ago, Sidney Finkelstein, a British music critic, published a little book in which he set out to tell the public at large "how music expresses ideas." Most of the book dealt with the possibility that Brahms, because of his interest in the seventeenth century, was a "reactionary" musician, and that Tchaikovsky, because of his interest in popular issues, was a "progressive" musician. No need to resort to aesthetics to discuss such a point. Suffice it to say that, despite Tchaikovsky's popular concerns, highly melodic compositions have never been able to change the viewpoint of the bour

geoisie who favored them, whereas Brahms's "return" to the seventeenth century may have been crucial in giving music the direction it took at the end of the century. But Brahms notwithstanding, a musician can be considered "progressive" to the extent he manages to translate a new vision of the world into new musical forms. Schonberg, in his *Warsaw Survivor*, is able to express an entire culture's outrage at Nazi brutality: having worked on forms for a very long time, he was able to find a new way to look at the world musically. Had Schonberg used the tonal system he would have composed not the *Warsaw Survivor* but the *Warsaw Concerto*, which develops the same subject according to the most rigorous laws of tonality. Of course, Addinsell was not a Schonberg, nor would all the twelve-tone series of this world suffice to turn him into one. On the other hand, we cannot attribute all the merit of a composition to the genius of its creator. The formal starting point of a work often determines what follows: a tonal discourse dealing with the bombing of Warsaw could not but lapse into sugary pathos and evolve along the paths of bad faith.

This brings us closer to the heart of the matter: it is impossible to describe a situation by means of a language that is not itself expressed by that situation. All language reflects a system of cultural relationships with its own particular implications. I cannot, for instance, translate the French word *esprit* from a positivist text as the English word "spirit," whose implications are profoundly idealistic.

This also applies to most narrative structures. A novel that begins with the description of a place or a situation, followed by the physical and psychological description of the main characters, automatically implies that its author believes in a certain order of things—in the objectivity of a natural setting in which human beings move and act, in the psychological and ethical dimension of physiological traits, and, finally, in the existence of precise causal relationships that will allow the reader to deduce—from the nature of the context, the peculiarities of the characters, and other concomitant factors—the univocal sequence of events that is most likely to follow.<sup>10</sup>

The moment an artist realizes that the system of communication at his disposal is extraneous to the historical situation he wants to depict, he must also understand that the only way he will be able to solve his problem is through the invention of new formal structures that will embody that situation and become its *model*.

The real content of a work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming (*modo di formare*). Any analysis of the relationship between art and the world will have to take place at this level.

Art knows the world through its formal structures (which, therefore, can no longer be considered from a purely formalist point of view but must be seen as its true content). Literature is an organization of words that signify different aspects of the world, but the literary work is itself an aspect of the world in the way its words are organized, even when every single word, taken in isolation, has absolutely no meaning, or simply refers to events and relationships among events that may appear to have nothing to do with the world."

With the foregoing premises, it is now possible to examine the situation of a literature which, aware of the existence of an industrial society, purports to express this reality in both its possibilities and its limitations. The poet who, having sensed the alienation suffered by man in a technological society, decides to describe and denounce it by means of a "common" language (that is to say, the kind of language that can be understood by everybody), used referentially as a vehicle to communicate a "subject" (say, the situation of the worker in contemporary society), can be at once commended for his generosity and condemned for fraud. Let's now try to analyze the communicative situation of a purely imaginary poet necessarily emphasizing to an extreme point its defects and contradictions.

Our poet thinks he has identified a concrete situation shared by all mankind. And he may be right. But he also thinks that he can describe and judge it by using a language that is totally exterior to the situation, and this is where he becomes the victim of a double misunderstanding. If the language allows him to grasp the situation, then it reflects the situation and must be affected by the same crisis. If, on the contrary, his language is exterior to the situation, then it will never be able to fully grasp it.

Let's now examine how someone who specializes in description of this sort of situation—say, a sociologist, or better yet an anthropologist—would deal with the problem. If he (or she) tries to describe and define the ethical relationships of a primitive community by relying on the ethical categories of Western society, he will no longer be able to understand the situation or to make it intelligible

to others. The moment he defines a particular rite as "barbaric" (the way a nineteenth-century traveler would), he fails to help us understand the cultural model in which that rite finds its *raison d'être*. On the other hand, if he chooses to adopt the notion of "cultural model" without any reservation (that is, if he decides to see the society he wants to describe as something absolute, with no relation to other social situations), he will have to describe the rite as the natives see it and will thus be unable to explain it to us. He must therefore realize that since our categories are inadequate to the task, his only other option is to translate, through a series of mediations, the natives' own categories into something analogous to ours, while constantly reminding us that what he is proposing to us is a paraphrase and not a literal translation.

His description will thus rest on a sort of metalanguage that will force him to walk a tightrope between two possible pitfalls: on one side, the risk of judging the situation in Western terms, and, on the other, that of alienating himself entirely to the native mentality and of quite defeating the purpose of his work. In other words, on one side we have the aristocratic attitude of the old-fashioned traveler who passes from one "primitive" civilization to the next, and, being unable to understand any, tries to "civilize" them all in the worst possible fashion—which is to say, he tries to "colonize" them. On the other side, we have the skepticism of some anthropologists who, considering each relativistic cultural model as a self-explanatory and self-justifying entity, provide a series of descriptive vignettes that will never enable anybody to bridge the gap between two different cultures. The best solution, although the most difficult, is, of course, that of the sensitive anthropologist who, in formulating his own descriptive language, keeps in mind the profoundly dialectic nature of the situation and tries simultaneously to provide the tools necessary to understand and accept it and the means to speak of it in familiar terms.

Let's now return to our "model" poet. As soon as he decides that he would rather be a poet than a sociologist or an anthropologist, he renounces the attempt to develop an ad hoc technical language and tries to "poeticize" his discourse on the industrial situation by relying on traditional poetic forms. Within this tradition, he may opt for a more or less commemorative, confessional, or "crepuscular" lyricism; in any case, his discourse will express merely his

subjective reaction to the scandal of a dramatic situation which quite eludes him. And it eludes him simply because his language is limited by a tradition of inner confession and is therefore incapable of grasping an ensemble of concrete and objective relationships. And yet, his language is also a result of the situation he is trying to express—the language of a situation which, refusing to confront its problems, has sought refuge in memory and lyricism, thereby transferring the search for change from the object to the subject.

Let's now assume that a novelist is trying to reproduce the same situation in a language that is apparently related to it, whether it be technical, political, or popular. If he is an anthropologist, he will first list all the relevant forms of communication, which he will then analyze in relation to each other and to the manner in which each is employed. But if he wants to give the situation and its characteristic language a narrative form, he will have to organize all the elements at his disposal in a narrative progression borrowed from the literary tradition. Having thus seized the language of a situation in which human relationships are distorted, betrayed, and, generally speaking, in a state of continuous crisis, he is led to organize it according to a narrative convention that automatically masks its true fragmentary, dissociated nature with an appearance of continuity and order, which quite thwarts his initial intentions. Of course, this appearance of order is not only false but also inappropriate, since, by right, it belongs to narrative structures meant to express the vision of an orderly universe. The very fact that this order is expressed in terms of a language that is extraneous to the situation constitutes a sort of judgment. The narrator has committed himself to understanding a situation of alienation but has failed to alienate himself in it. Rather, he has avoided it by resorting to narrative structures that have drawn him away from his object.<sup>12</sup> The structure of a traditional narrative can be compared to that of a "tonal" composition in music. Its most extreme example is that of the detective story. Here, everything starts within the context of an established order: a paradigmatic series of ethical relationships rationally administered by the law. Something disrupts this order: a crime. There follows an investigation conducted by a mind (the detective's), untainted by the disorder that has led to the crime. From the list of suspects, the detective sorts out those who fit the social and ethical system they inhabit from those who do not. He

then classifies the latter according to the extent of their deviation, beginning with those who are only apparently deviant from those who are really so. In other words, he eliminates all the false clues, whose main function is that of keeping the reader in a state of suspense, and, by and by, he discovers the real causes of the crime, and, among his suspects, the one most likely to be affected by them. After which, the culprit is punished and order is reestablished.

Let's now assume that an author of detective stories, the sort of author who has full confidence in traditional structures (which, at the simplest level, are characteristic of the detective story, but, at a more sophisticated level, are also found in Balzac), decides to describe the situation of a character who works in the stock market. His actions are not necessarily prompted by the parameters of one particular order; they may be inspired by the ethical parameters of the society in which he lives, or by those of an economy based on free enterprise, or by no parameters other than the irrational oscillations of the market—whether they relate to an actual industrial situation or merely to some financial shift whose dynamics, far from depending on individual decisions, quite transcend them, thereby determining them and alienating (really alienating) all those who are caught in this autonomous circuit of interacting factors. Neither the language of such a character nor his value system depends on any one order or any one psychology. His behavior with women may be dictated by a particular psychic disorder (he may, for instance, suffer from an Oedipus complex), but in all his other relationships he will be motivated by the objective configuration of the financial situation, in which case there will be no causal relationship between his actions and his unconscious urges. The author of this sort of story will have to deal with a form of dissociation that is characteristic of our times, and that affects our feelings as well as our language and our actions. He knows that a decision made by his character may not produce the sort of effect that could be predicted by the traditional laws of causality, since the situation from which the character operates may lend his action an altogether different value. Consequently, if the author tries to tell the story of this character according to traditional laws of narrative causality, the character will elude him. If, instead, he assumes the role of the anthropologist and tries to describe the situation in all its

social and economic implications, he will be obliged to provide all sorts of descriptions but will have to leave a conclusive interpretation to a later phase of his research—in other words, he will have to provide all sorts of details for the "model" he intends to depict but will not be able to give any finality to his depiction, as most authors like to do, by enclosing his vision in a formal organization expressing a particular view of reality.

His only other option will be that of describing his character according to the terms of the situation. In other words, he will describe the complexity and imprecision of his character's relationships, and the nonexistence of his behavioral parameters, by consciously calling into question his own narrative parameters.

How does Joyce deal with contemporary journalism? He cannot, nor does he want to, tell us about it by employing a language that is extraneous to it. So he constructs a whole chapter of *Ulysses* out of the casual and perfectly insignificant chitchat of a group of journalists in an average editorial room. Each fragment of the conversation is appropriately titled and boxed, in the best journalistic fashion and according to a stylistic progression that ranges all the way from the most traditional Victorian headline to the syntactically flawed vernacular of an evening scandal-rag. By so doing, not only does Joyce cover all the possible rhetorical figures of journalism, but he also expresses his opinion of mass media. Since he does not feel he has the right to judge a situation if he remains outside it, he decides to turn the situation into a formal structure and let it speak for itself (revealing itself for what it is). In other words, he alienates himself in the situation by assuming its expressions, its methods. But by giving these expressions and methods a formal structure, he can also elude the situation and control it. In other words, he avoids alienation by turning the situation in which he has alienated himself into a narrative structure. This is a classical example. For a more contemporary example, let's turn to the cinema, to a movie such as Antonioni's *Eclipse*.

Antonioni does not tell us anything about our world and its problems, about a social reality that would interest any movie director eager to express an artistic opinion of our contemporary industrial situation—or, at least, not in so many words. Instead, he shows us two people, a man and a woman, who leave each other for no reason, or out of emotional aridity. The woman subse-

quently has an affair with another man, also for no reason and without any emotional commitment. The emotional inertia of the characters and their perfunctory actions are regularly punctuated by the hard and ineluctable presence of objects, which seems to dominate both human relationships and the situation in which these occur. Predictably, the central setting of the movie is the stock market, where fortunes are made and unmade according to no visible logic, for no palpable reason, and with no definite aim. ("What happens to all these billions?" the young woman asks a young broker, who readily admits he does not know. His aggressive manner gives the impression of a strong will in action, but in fact he is a pawn, acted upon by the very situation he is trying to control: he is the perfect example of alienation.) No psychological parameter can explain this situation. It is what it is precisely because nowadays it is impossible to believe in unitary parameters; each individual is fragmented and manipulated by a number of external forces. Of course, an artist cannot express all this as a judgment because a judgment would require, along with an ethical parameter, the syntax and the grammar of a rational system, the grammar of the traditional movie, in which events follow one another causally. The best solution for a movie director is to show the moral and psychological indeterminacy of the situation in the indeterminacy of the sequences: scenes follow one another for no apparent reason; the camera lingers on objects with an intensity that has no motive and no aim. Antonioni lets his forms express the alienation he wants to communicate to his public. By choosing to express it in the very structure of his discourse, he manages to control it while letting it act upon his viewers. This movie about a useless and unlikely love affair between useless and unlikely characters tells us more about contemporary man and his world than a panoramic melodrama involving workers in overalls and countless social confrontations, structured according to the logical, rational demands of a nineteenth-century plot—whose very denouement would imply the resolution of all contradictions into a universal order.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the only order man can impose upon his situation is the order of a structural organization whose very disorder leads to the apprehension of the situation.

Naturally, the artist does not provide a solution. As Zolla points out, thought must understand. Its task is not to provide remedies.

At least, not just

All this should, of course, lend a clearer meaning to the function of the avant-garde and of its descriptive possibilities. To understand the world, avant-garde art delves into it and assumes its critical condition from within, adopting, to describe it, the same alienated language in which it expresses itself. But by giving this language a descriptive function and laying it bare as a narrative form, avant-garde art also strips it of its alienating aspects and allows us to demystify it.

Another pedagogical function of this poetics could be the following: the new perception of things, and the new way of relating them to each other, promoted by art might eventually lead us to understand our situation not by imposing on it a univocal order expressive of an obsolete conception of the world but rather by elaborating models leading to a number of mutually complementary results, as science does. In this way, even those artistic processes that seem most removed from our immediate concerns may in *fact* provide us with the imaginative categories necessary to move more easily in this world.

Having reached this conclusion, however, can we assert with any degree of certainty that this process, whose first phase involves the acceptance of the existing situation and our immersion in it in order to possess it from within, will not end in a total objectification of the situation and a passive adherence to the "continuous flux of existence"? Calvino raised this very issue a few years ago when he denounced the disquieting and suffocating presence of a "sea of objectivity." Indeed, there is a great deal of literature that could end up as a mere recording of inaction, as a nearly photographic reproduction of dissociation, as a beatific vision (in Zen-like terms) of what happens.

But, as I have already noted, it is impossible to stand up to the "flux of existence" by opposing it to an ideal human standard of measurement. What results is not an irrational, obtuse, metaphysical datum: it is the world of modified nature, of man-made work. We now see this man-made world as if it existed independently of our labor, as if it had evolved according to its own laws. This world that we have created can now turn us into its tools, but it can also provide us with the elements necessary to establish the parameters for a new human standard of measurement. The flux of existence

would remain essentially unaltered and hostile to us if we lived in its midst without speaking of it. But as soon as we start speaking of it, be it only to record its distortions, we judge it, we alienate ourselves to it, and thus we take the first step toward repossessing it. To speak, however objectively, of a "sea of objectivity" means that we have already reduced this objectivity to a human dimension.

But this is not the way Calvino sees it. Quite the contrary. He seems to take for granted what Robbe-Grillet says when he theorizes on his work. In his ambiguously (I would even say "falsely") phenomenological poetics, Robbe-Grillet pretends that his narrative technique aims at an uncommitted vision of things, at an acceptance of things for what they are, beside and beyond us: "The world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply . . . Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things *are there*. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve . . . Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.""

This sort of statement amply justifies Calvino's alarm. But it would be wrong to give it more credit than it deserves. What an artist tells us explicitly is often contradicted by what he tells us implicitly, in the way he has constructed his work. A work of art, taken as the successful expression of a way of forming, can refer to the formal tendencies of an entire culture or an entire period, tendencies which, in turn, reflect analogous procedures in other fields, such as science and philosophy. The idea of such a *Kunstwollen* seems particularly suited to a discourse concerning the cultural meaning of contemporary formal tendencies. And yet, there is quite a discrepancy between what Robbe-Grillet says he is doing in his work and what he in fact does. In his books, things do not appear as extraneous metaphysical entities, totally unrelated to us; rather, they appear to have a very particular relationship with us, to be "intentioned" by us. They are assumed and judged, and therefore reduced to a human dimension. Robbe-Grillet's work deals both with objects and with the people who see them and who can

no longer relate to them, though they might yet find a new way of doing so in the future. The fluidity of characterization in *In the Labyrinth*—where objects also appear as fluid—is, in fact, only an expression of a new vision of time and reversibility, such as has emerged from the hypotheses of modern science. (As I have mentioned elsewhere, the temporal structure of *In the Labyrinth* had already been sketched by Hans Reichenbach. Although, at the level of macroscopic relationships, the only applicable notion of time remains that of classical physics as it is reflected in the structures of traditional narrative—and, more specifically, in the irreversible and univocal relationship between cause and effect—the artist can decide to make an experiment that has absolutely no scientific validity but is characteristic of the way in which an entire culture reacts to new stimuli; he can thus structure his narrative according to a nonclassical notion of time. At this point, such a notion of time is no longer a scientific model used to describe remote microphysical events; rather, it becomes a sort of game that we play from inside and that gives shape to our entire existence.

This is only one possible interpretation of *In the Labyrinth*, and yet the labyrinth could also be used as an apt metaphor for the stock market situation described by Antonioni in *Eclipse*—a place in which people are constantly becoming other than themselves, in which they find it impossible to follow the progress of their investments and to interpret events according to a unidirectional chain of cause and effect.

Of course, I am not saying that Robbe-Grillet meant to do all this in his book. He did not have to. All he had to do was create a structural situation that would lend itself to all sorts of personal interpretations without, for all that, losing any of its basic ambiguity: "As for the novel's characters, they may themselves suggest many possible interpretations; they may, according to the preoccupations of each reader, accommodate all kinds of comment—psychological, psychiatric, religious, or political—yet their indifference to these 'potentialities' will soon be apparent . . . The future hero will remain, on the contrary, *there*. It is the commentaries that **will** be left elsewhere; in the face of his irrefutable presence, they will seem useless, superfluous, even improper." 6

Robbe-Grillet is right in thinking that a narrative structure must remain *below* all the interpretations it may elicit, but he is wrong in

thinking that it *can* entirely avoid them because it is extraneous to them. It can't be extraneous to them, since it is a sort of propositional *function* which can stand for a series of situations that are already familiar to us. It is a propositional function that each of us fills in a different way depending on how we look at it, but that is there to be filled since it is the field of possibilities of a series of relationships that can really be posited—just as the constellation of sounds that constitutes a musical series is the field of possibilities of the series of relationships we can establish among these sounds. Narrative structures have become fields of possibilities precisely because, when we enter a contradictory situation in order to understand it, the tendencies of such a situation can no longer assume a unilinear development that can be determined *a priori*. Rather, all of them appear to us as equally possible, some in a positive fashion and some in a negative, some as a way out of the situation and others as a form of alienation to the crisis itself.

The work thus proposes itself as an open structure that reproduces the very ambiguity of our being-in-the-world, as it is described by science, philosophy, psychology, sociology—just as our relationship with the automobile is a dialectic tension between possession and alienation, a knot of complementary possibilities.

Of course, Robbe-Grillet is only one instance of a much larger problem, an instance which, however, extreme as it is, should help us understand why the authors of the *nouveau roman* were so often on Sartre's side in their endorsement of political manifestos. This baffled Sartre, who could not understand how writers who seemed to keep such a distance from political issues in their narrative could be so eager to be personally involved in them. But, as a matter of fact, all these writers (some more, some less) felt that the only way they could deal with their world in their work was by "playing" with narrative structures, since all the problems which, at the level of individual psychology and of biography, could be considered problems of conscience, in literature could be reflected only in the way the work was structured. Hence, as they refused to speak of a political project in their art, they implied it in the way they looked at the world, and turned this way of looking at the world into their project. This decision may at first appear inhuman, but on second thought it may well be the only form our humanism can assume.

In *Signs*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines humanism as follows:



"If there is a humanism today, it rids itself of the illusion Valery described so well when he spoke of 'that little man within man whom we always presuppose' . . . The 'little man within man' is only the phantom of our successful expressive operations; and the admirable man is not this phantom but the man who—installed in his fragile body, in a language that has already done so much speaking, and in an unstable history—gathers himself together and begins to see, to understand, and to signify. There is no longer anything decorous or decorative about today's humanism. It no longer loves man in opposition to his body, mind in opposition to its language, values in opposition to facts. It no longer speaks of man and mind except in a sober way, with modesty: mind and man never *are*; they show through in the movement by which the body becomes gesture, language an *oeuvre*, and coexistence truth."

*Installed in a language that has already done so much speaking:* this is the problem. The artist realizes that language, having already done too much speaking, has become alienated to the situation *it* was meant to express. He realizes that, if he accepts this language, he will also alienate himself to the situation. So he tries to dislocate this language from within, in order to be able to escape from the situation and judge it from without. Since language can be dislocated only according to a dialectic that is already part of its inner evolution, the language that will result from such a dislocation will still, somehow, reflect the historical situation that was itself produced by the crisis of the one that had preceded it. I violate language because I refuse to express, through it, a false integrity that is no longer ours, but, by doing so, I can't but express and accept the very dissociation that has arisen out of the crisis of integrity and that I meant to dominate with my discourse. There is no alternative to this dialectic. As already mentioned, all the artist can hope to do is cast some light on alienation by objectifying it in a form that reproduces it.

This is the situation sketched by Edoardo Sanguineti in his essay *Poesia informale* (Informal poetry): true, there is a poetry that sounds like the poetry of a nervous breakdown, but this breakdown is, above all, historical. To denounce it, it is necessary to assume its compromised language so that we can place it in front of our eyes and become aware of it; it is necessary to exacerbate the contradictions of the contemporary avant-garde, since the way to freedom

can be found only from within a culture; it is necessary to suffer a massive dose of the very crisis we want to solve; in short, it is necessary to go through the entire *Pains Putredinis*, since "to be innocent is no longer possible," and "in any case, for us, form can come only out of the formless, out of the formless horizon which, whether we like it or not, is our lot."

This stance is obviously quite risky. The last citation recalls the attitude of certain gnostics (Carpocrates, for instance) who believed that, to get rid of the influence of angels, lords of the cosmos, it was necessary to undergo the experience of evil, and delve into baseness to emerge from it totally purified. The historical consequence of such a persuasion took the form of the Templars' secret rites and the liturgical perversions of an underground church whose major saint was Gilles de Rais.

And, indeed, for every artist who tries to grasp his reality by assuming the language of its crisis there is a mannerist who borrows the technique without understanding its purpose and thus turns the work of the avant-garde into sheer mannerism, a self-complacent exercise, just another way of alienating oneself to the existing situation by turning the anxiety of revolt and the bitterness of criticism into a formal exercise that takes place exclusively at the level of structure.

On the other hand, if it is possible to assert that the only way in which one can speak of a situation is by delving into it and by assuming its means of expression, it is impossible to define the limits of the process, or the standard of comparison that would allow us to determine whether the artist has really been able to turn his experience into some sort of revelation or whether, in fact, it has been for him only a pleasant, passive vacation. But this is the task of a critical discourse that analyzes one work at a time and not of a philosophical investigation concerned with a certain attitude of contemporary poetics. We can, at most, propose an aesthetic hypothesis: whenever this process of awareness produces an organic work that expresses itself in all its structural connections, we can assume that this is also evidence of the degree of awareness of both its author and its audience. The form of such a work cannot but refer to the cultural reality it represents—refer to it in the most complete and organic way possible. Every successful form rests on the conscious translation of

mension. In order to dominate matter, the artist must first understand it; if he has understood it, he cannot be its prisoner, no matter how severely he has judged it. And even if he has accepted it wholeheartedly, he has accepted it only after seeing its wealth of implications and after discerning, without disgust, the tendencies that may seem negative to us. This is the situation that Marx and Engels saw as perfectly realized in Balzac, whom they considered as both a reactionary and a legitimist. According to them, Balzac was able to sketch and organize the rich substance of the world he chose to narrate with such a visionary depth that his work (that is, the work of a writer totally disinterested in certain issues, and basically in agreement with his world—unlike the work of Eugene Sue, who in the name of progress tried to express a political judgment on the situation in which he lived) is essential for an understanding and evaluation of bourgeois society. In other words, Balzac accepted the situation in which he lived, but he was also able to express it so lucidly in all its connections, that he did not remain its prisoner, or, at least, not in his work.

Balzac conducted his analysis at the level of plot, in the way he presented his subject matter (whose aim was to illustrate the content of his investigation). Contemporary literature no longer analyzes the world in this fashion; rather, it exposes it by means of a structural articulation—so that this articulation is itself the subject, and thereby the content, of the work.

This is how literature—like music, painting, cinema—expresses the discomfort of a certain human situation. On the other hand, we cannot reasonably expect that contemporary society be its only concern. Literature can also realize, in its structures, the image of the cosmos that is promoted by science, the last frontier of a metaphysical anxiety which, being unable to give unitary form to the world on a conceptual level, cries to elaborate its replacement on an aesthetic level, in an aesthetic form. *Finnegans Wake* may well be an example of such a literary direction.

Some people believe that a concern with cosmic relationships is an expression of indifference toward mankind and a way of avoiding more human issues. But this is nonsense. A literature that tries to express, in its openness and indeterminacy, the vertiginous and hypothetical universes perceived by the scientific imagination is still concerned with mankind, since it tries to define a universe that

has assumed its present configuration thanks to a human process; by "process" I mean the application of a descriptive model to an objective reality. Here again, literature would express our relationship to the object of our knowledge, and our concern with the form we have given the world, or the form we have failed to give it, and would try to provide our imagination with schemes without which we might not be able to understand a large part of our technical and scientific activity—which would then really become alien to us, and assume control over our lives.

In any case, the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear—indeed, so unclear that it would be ridiculous to pretend to define them from the uncontaminated podium of rhetoric. It would be only another way of escaping reality and leaving it exactly as it is. And wouldn't this be the ultimate and most successful figure of alienation?