

**MICHEL
HOUELLEBECQ**

INTERVENTIONS

2020

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10 Opera Bianca

4"

36"

43"

50"

56"

59"

1'00"

1'04"

1'06"

1'10"

1'17"

2'15"

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Interventions 2020

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polity

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1

Jacques Prévert is a jerk

Jacques Prévert is someone whose poems you learn at school. It turns out that he loved flowers, birds, the neighbourhoods of old Paris, etc. He felt that love blossomed in an atmosphere of freedom; more generally, he was *pretty much on the side of* freedom. He wore a cap and smoked Gauloises; he sometimes gets confused with Jean Gabin. Also, he was the one who wrote the screenplay for *Quai des brumes*, *Portes de la nuit*, etc. He also wrote the screenplay for *Les Enfants du paradis*, considered to be his masterpiece. All of these are so many good reasons for hating Jacques Prévert – especially if you read the scripts that Antonin Artaud was writing at the same time, which were never filmed. It's dismaying to note that this repulsive *poetic realism*, of which Prévert was the main architect, continues to wreak havoc – we think we're paying Leos Carax a compliment by identifying him with this style (just as people make out that Rohmer is undoubtedly a new Guitry, etc.). In fact, French cinema has never recovered from the advent of the talkies; one day these talkies will finally kill cinema. Too bad.¹

After the war, around the same time as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Prévert enjoyed enormous success; one can't help being struck by the optimism of that generation. These days, the most influential thinker is more likely to be Cioran.² At that time, people listened to Vian, Brassens ...³ Lovers smooched on public benches, there was a baby boom, and plenty of low-cost housing was built to accommodate all those people. Lots of optimism, faith in

the future, and a certain amount of bullshit. Obviously, we've got a lot smarter since then.

With the intellectuals, Prévert was less fortunate. Yet his poems are full of those silly puns that are so entertaining in Bobby Lapointe ...⁴ Still, it's true that the *chanson* is, as we say, a 'minor' genre, and even intellectuals need something to relax to. But when they focus on written texts, their real livelihood, they become harsh critics. And Prévert's 'textual work' remains embryonic: he writes with clarity and a real naturalness, sometimes even with emotion; he's not interested in writing as such, nor in the impossibility of writing; his main source of inspiration, it seems, is life. So on the whole he hasn't provided fodder for postgraduate theses. Today, however, he has entered the *Pléiade*, which constitutes a second death.⁵ There his work lies, complete and frozen. This is an excellent opportunity to wonder why Jacques Prévert's poetry is so mediocre – so much so that one sometimes feels a sort of shame when reading it. The classic explanation (his writing 'lacks rigour') is quite wrong; through his puns, his light and limpid rhythms, Prévert actually expresses his conception of the world perfectly well. The form suits the content, which is the most that can be demanded of a form. Moreover, when a poet immerses himself so much in life, in the real life of his time, it would be an insult to judge him by purely stylistic criteria. If Jacques Prévert writes, it's because he has something to say; that's all to his credit. Unfortunately, what he has to say is boundlessly stupid; sometimes it makes you feel nauseous. There are pretty girls with no clothes on, and middle-class men who bleed like pigs when their throats are cut. The children are charmingly immoral, the thugs are alluring hunks, the pretty girls with no clothes on give their bodies to the thugs; the middle-class men are old, obese, impotent, and decorated with the Legion of Honour; their wives are frigid; the priests are

disgusting old caterpillars who invented sin to stop us from living. It's all very familiar; one can be forgiven for thinking that Baudelaire does it better. Or even Karl Marx who, at least, doesn't miss his target when he writes that 'the bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand [...] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation'.⁶ Intelligence is of no help at all in writing good poems; it does however stop you writing bad ones. If Jacques Prévert is a bad poet, this is mainly because his vision of the world is commonplace, superficial and false. It was already false in his own time; today its inanity is so glaring that the entire work seems to be the expansion of one gigantic cliché. On the philosophical and political level, Jacques Prévert is above all a libertarian; in other words, basically, an idiot.

We've been splashing about in the 'icy water of egotistical calculation' since our earliest childhood. We can live with this situation, we can try to survive it; we can also just let ourselves sink. But what it's impossible to imagine is that freeing the powers of desire alone is likely to melt the ice. The story goes that it was Robespierre who insisted on adding the word 'fraternity' to the motto of the French Republic; we're now in a position to gauge the full irony of this anecdote. Prévert certainly saw himself as a supporter of fraternity; but Robespierre was not an opponent of virtue – far from it.

Notes

- ¹ Houellebecq's summary of the reasons for Prévert's notoriety includes references to the films directed by Marcel Carné for which Prévert wrote the screenplays, including *Quai des brumes* (1938), starring Jean Gabin, *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), and *Portes de la nuit*

(1946). Antonin Artaud seems to have written fifteen screenplays for films, of which only one was made (*La Coquille et le clergyman*, Germaine Dulac, 1928). As a director, Leos Carax – whose films include *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991) and *Holy Motors* (2012) – is noted for his ‘poetic’ style, if not exactly for his realism. Éric Rohmer (1920–2010) was noted for his talkative films, part of the French New Wave; and Sacha Guitry (1885–1957) was active in theatre and then cinema: he decided that the advent of the talkies was a boon for film and became a prolific cinema director.

2. Emil Cioran (1911–1995), born in Romania, settled in Paris in the Second World War and became known as a French writer of pessimistic essays and aphorisms.
3. Boris Vian (1920–1959) was talented in many artistic fields, well known as a singer and songwriter; Georges Brassens (1921–1981) was also a famed singer and songwriter.
4. Robert (known as Bobby) Lapointe (1922–1972) was a humorous *chansonnier* and actor known for his word play.
5. The *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* is a collection of (mainly French) writers deemed to be classics; to ‘enter the *Pléiade*’ is a mark of literary consecration.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, available online:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>.

2

***The Mirage* by Jean-Claude Guiguet**

A cultivated middle-class family on the shores of Lake Geneva. Classical music, short sequences with a great deal of dialogue, cutaways to the lake; all of this might give one the impression of *déjà vu*. The fact that the girl is painting intensifies our worries. But no, this isn't the twentyfifth Eric Rohmer clone. It's, oddly, much more than that.

When a film constantly juxtaposes the maddening and the magical, the magical rarely wins out; yet that's what happens here. The actors, somewhat hit-and-miss in their approach, have a hard time interpreting a script that seems overwritten and sometimes borders on the ridiculous. People will say they haven't found the right tone; this may not be entirely their fault. What's the right tone for a sentence such as 'The fine weather has come to join us'? Only the mother, Louise Marleau, is perfect from start to finish, and it's undoubtedly her magnificent love monologue (it's an amazing thing in films, the love monologue) that elicits our unreserved approval. We can soon forgive some of the dubious dialogues, some of the rather heavy-handed musical punctuations; in any case, none of this would get noticed in an ordinary film.

Starting with a theme of tragic simplicity (it's spring and the weather is fine; a woman of about fifty aspires to experience one last carnal passion; but if nature is beautiful, it's also cruel), Jean-Claude Guiguet has taken the maximum risk: that of formal perfection. The film is as

far removed from the TV advert effect as it is from sputtering realism and arbitrary experimentalism; here, the sole pursuit is that of pure beauty. The way it's cut into sequences, classic, refined, tenderly daring, corresponds exactly to the impeccable geometry of the framing. It's all precise, sober, and structured like the facets of a diamond: a rare work. It's also rare to see a film where the light so intelligently suits the emotional tone of the scenes. The lighting and decoration of the interior scenes are profoundly right, infinitely tactful; they remain in the background, like a discreet and dense orchestral accompaniment. It's only in the outdoor scenes, in the sunny meadows bordering the lake, that the light bursts out, playing a central role; and this too is perfectly in line with the film's purpose. There is a terrible carnal luminosity to the faces. Nature wears a shimmering mask, which, as we know, conceals a sordid swarming, but this mask can't be torn away (never, by the way, has the spirit of Thomas Mann been so profoundly captured). We can't expect anything good to come from the sun; but human beings can perhaps, to some extent, manage to love each other. I don't remember hearing a mother say 'I love you' to her daughter so convincingly; not in any film, ever.

With violence, with nostalgia, almost with pain, *Le Mirage* sets out to be a cultivated film, a *European* film; and oddly enough it succeeds, combining an authentically Germanic depth and sense of fracture with a profoundly French luminosity and classic clarity of exposition. Truly a rare film.

3

Approaches to distress

‘I’m fighting ideas that I’m not even sure exist.’

Antoine Waechter

Contemporary architecture as a vector for speeding up movements

The general public, as everyone knows, doesn’t like contemporary art. This trivial observation in fact covers two opposing attitudes. Ordinary passers-by who happen to walk through a place where contemporary pieces of painting or sculpture are being exhibited will stop in front of the works on display, if only to make fun of them. Their attitude will swing between ironic amusement and outright sneer; in any case, they will be sensitive to a certain dimension of *derision*; the very meaninglessness of what is presented to them will be a reassuring guarantee of harmlessness; they will certainly have *wasted their time*, but in a way that is basically not all that unpleasant.

Placed, this time, amid contemporary architecture, the same passers-by will feel much less like laughing. Under favourable conditions (late at night, or against a background of police sirens), a phenomenon clearly marked by *anxiety* will be observed, and all their organic secretions will go into overdrive. In each case, the functional unit comprising the organs of vision and the locomotor limbs will experience a significant intensification.

This is what happens when a coach full of tourists, thrown off course by the web of exotic traffic signs, drops off its passengers in the banking district of Segovia, or the business centre of Barcelona. Immersed in their usual world of steel, glass and signposts, visitors immediately rediscover the rapid stride, the functional and oriented gaze that correspond to the environment offered to them. Progressing between pictograms and written signs, they soon reach the cathedral district, the historic heart of the city. Immediately their pace slows; the movement of their eyes becomes somewhat random, almost erratic. A certain dazed amazement can be read on their faces (their jaws drop, a phenomenon typical of Americans). Obviously, they feel they are in the presence of unusual, complex objects that are difficult to decipher. Soon, however, messages appear on the walls; thanks to the tourist office, historical and cultural landmarks are set in context; our travellers can take out their camcorders to record the memory of their travels in a *guided* cultural tour.

Contemporary architecture is a *modest* architecture; it manifests its autonomous presence, its presence *as* architecture, solely through discreet *winks* – generally these are advertising micro-messages about the techniques behind its own fabrication (for example, it's customary to ensure very good visibility for lift machinery, as well as for the firm responsible for its design).

Contemporary architecture is a *functional* architecture; indeed, any aesthetic questions concerning it have long since been eradicated by the formula: 'What is functional is necessarily beautiful.' This is a surprising bias, which the spectacle of nature constantly contradicts, as the latter incites us to see beauty as a way of *taking revenge on reason*. If the forms of nature appeal to the eye, this is often because they are useless, and do not meet any perceptible criterion of efficiency. They reproduce

themselves in a rich, luxuriant way, apparently moved by an internal force that can be described as the pure desire to be, the simple desire to reproduce – a force that is not really understandable (just think of the burlesque and somewhat repulsive inventiveness of the animal world), a force that is nonetheless suffocatingly obvious. Admittedly, certain forms of inanimate nature (crystals, clouds, hydrographic networks) seem to obey a criterion of thermodynamic optimality; but these are precisely the most complex, the most ramified. They do not make one think of the functioning of a rational machine, but rather of the chaotic turmoil of a *process*.

Reaching its own optimum by creating places so functional that they become invisible, contemporary architecture is a *transparent* architecture. Since it has to allow for rapid movement of people and goods, it tends to reduce space to its purely geometric dimension. As it's meant to be crossed by an uninterrupted succession of textual, visual and iconic messages, it must ensure maximum readability for them (only a perfectly transparent place is likely to ensure a total conductivity of information). Subject to the harsh law of consensus, the only permanent messages this architecture can allow itself will be confined to objective information. Thus, the content of those huge signs that line motorway routes has been the subject of thorough preliminary studies. Numerous surveys have been carried out in order to avoid offending one or other category of users; social psychologists have been consulted, as well as road safety specialists; all of this just to end up with indications of the kind: 'Auxerre', or: 'The lakes'.

The Gare Montparnasse deploys a transparent and non-mysterious architecture, establishing a necessary and sufficient distance between video screens showing timetable information and electronic reservation terminals, organizing with adequate redundancy the signage of the

departure and arrival platforms; this allows Western individuals of average or higher intelligence to achieve their goal of travel by minimizing friction, uncertainty, and wasted time. More generally, all contemporary architecture must be considered as an immense apparatus for the acceleration and rationalization of human movements; its ideal point, in this regard, would be the motorway interchange system that can be observed in the vicinity of Fontainebleau-Melun Sud.

This is also how the architectural ensemble known as 'La Défense'¹ can be read as a pure productivist arrangement, a device for increasing individual productivity. This paranoid vision may be locally accurate, but it fails to account for the uniformity of the architectural responses offered to cater for the diversity of social needs (hypermarkets, nightclubs, office buildings, cultural and sports centres). On the other hand, we will get a bit closer to the truth if we consider that we live not only in a market economy, but more generally in a *market society*, that is to say a space of civilization where all human relations, and similarly all human relationships with the world, are mediated through a simple numerical calculation involving attractiveness, novelty and value for money. In this logic, which covers erotic, romantic and professional relationships as well as purchasing behaviour as such, the point is to facilitate the establishment of many rapidly renewed relationships (between consumers and products, between employees and companies, between lovers), and thus to promote a consumerist fluidity based on an ethic of responsibility, transparency and free choice.

Building the shelves

Contemporary architecture implicitly adopts a simple program, which can be summed up as follows: *building the*

shelves of the social hypermarket. It achieves this on the one hand by showing total fidelity to the aesthetics of the pigeonhole, and on the other hand by favouring the use of materials that show low granular resistance (metal, glass, plastics). The use of reflective or transparent surfaces will also make it possible to increase the number of displays. In all cases, the aim is to create polymorphic, uniform, modular spaces. The same process, incidentally, is also at work in interior decoration: furnishing an apartment these days is essentially a matter of knocking down walls so to replace them with movable partitions – which will actually hardly be moved at all, as there is no reason to move them; but the main thing is that the possibility of movement exists, that an additional degree of freedom has been created – and the fixed decorations can be eliminated: the walls will be white, the furniture translucent.

Contemporary architecture is all about creating neutral spaces where the information and advertising messages generated by social functioning can be freely deployed, messages that in fact *constitute* that very functioning. After all, what is produced by the employees and executives gathered at La Défense? Strictly speaking, nothing; indeed, the process of material production has become completely opaque to them. Digital information about objects in the world is transmitted to them. This information is the raw material for statistics and calculations; models are developed, decision graphs are produced; at the end of the chain, decisions are made, new information is reinjected into the social body. Thus, the flesh of the world is replaced by its digitized image; the being of things is supplanted by the graph of its variations. Versatile, neutral and modular, modern places are adapted to the infinite number of messages they are to transmit. They cannot allow themselves to deliver an autonomous meaning, to evoke a particular atmosphere; they can thus have neither beauty, nor poetry, nor more generally any character of their own.

Stripped of all individual and permanent character, and on this condition, they will be ready to welcome the indefinite pulsation of the transient.

Mobile, open to transformation, always available, modern employees are undergoing a similar process of depersonalization. The techniques that teach adaptability, popularized by 'New Age' workshops, aim to create indefinitely mutable individuals, free from any intellectual or emotional rigidity. Freed from the shackles of belonging, loyalty, and rigid codes of behaviour, the modern individual is thus ready to take his place in a system of generalized transactions within which he or she can univocally and unambiguously be given an *exchange value*.

Simplifying the calculations

The gradual digitization of microsociological functioning, already well advanced in the United States, had lagged significantly behind in Western Europe, as the novels of Marcel Proust testify. It took several decades to completely filter out the symbolic meanings added onto the different professions, whether these meanings were laudatory (church, education) or deprecatory (advertising, prostitution). At the end of this decanting, it became possible to establish a precise hierarchy between different social statuses on the basis of two simple numerical criteria: annual income and number of hours worked.

In people's love lives, too, the parameters of sexual exchange had long been dependent on a lyrical, impressionistic, unreliable system of description. Once again, the first serious attempt to define standards came from the United States of America. Based on simple and objectively verifiable criteria (age - height - weight - hip-waist-chest sizes for women; age - height - weight - size of the erect penis for men), it was first popularized by the

porn industry, soon followed by women's magazines. While the simplified economic hierarchy was sporadically the object of protest over a long period (with movements in favour of 'social justice'), it should be noted that the erotic hierarchy, perceived as more natural, was quickly internalized and immediately met with a broad consensus.

Now able to define themselves by a brief collection of numerical parameters, freed from the thoughts of Being that had long hampered the fluidity of their mental movements, Western human beings – at least the youngest – were thus able to adapt to the technological changes affecting their societies, changes that in turn led to extensive economic, psychological and social transformations.

A brief history of information

Towards the end of the Second World War, the simulation of medium and long-range missile trajectories, and the modelling of fissile reactions inside the atomic nucleus, created a need for more powerful algorithmic and numerical computations. Thanks in part to the theoretical work of John von Neumann, the first computers were born.

At that time, office work was characterized by a standardization and rationalization that were far less advanced than they were in industrial production. The application of the first computers to management tasks immediately resulted in the disappearance of all freedom and flexibility in the implementation of working procedures – in short, in a brutal proletarianization of the class of employees.

In the same years, with a comic belatedness, European literature found itself confronted with a new tool: the *typewriter*. Indefinite and varied work on the manuscript

(with its additions, references and footnotes) disappeared in favour of a more linear and flatter writing; there was a de facto alignment with the standards of American detective novels and journalism (hence the appearance of the myth of the Underwood typewriter – Hemingway’s success).² This degradation of the image of literature led many young people with a ‘creative’ temperament to move towards the more rewarding paths of cinema and song (ultimately dead ends; indeed, the American entertainment industry was soon to begin the process of destroying local entertainment industries – a process that is now coming to an end).

The sudden appearance of the microcomputer in the early 1980s may appear to be some sort of historical accident; it did not correspond to any economic necessity, and is in fact inexplicable unless we factor in such elements as advances in the regulation of low currents and the fine etching of silicon. Office workers and middle managers unexpectedly found themselves in possession of a powerful, easy-to-use tool that allowed them to regain control – de facto, if not de jure – over the core elements of their work. A silent and largely unrecognized struggle lasting several years took place between IT departments and ‘basic’ users, sometimes supported by teams of passionate micro-IT specialists. What is most surprising is that gradually, as they became aware of the high costs and low efficiency of heavy computing, while mass production allowed the emergence of reliable and cheap office automation hardware and software, general management switched to microcomputers.

For the writer, the microcomputer was an unexpected liberation: it was not really a return to the flexibility and userfriendliness of the manuscript, but it became possible, all the same, to engage in serious work on a text. During the same years, various indicators suggested that literature

might regain some of its former prestige – albeit less on its own merits than through the self-effacement of rival activities. Rock music and cinema, subjected to the formidable levelling power of television, gradually lost their magic. The previous distinctions between films, music videos, news, advertising, human testimonies and reporting tended to fade in favour of the notion of a generalized spectacle.

The appearance of optical fibres and the industrial agreement on the TCP/IP protocol at the beginning of the 1990s made possible the emergence of networks within and then between companies. The microcomputer, now reduced yet again to being a simple workstation within reliable clientserver systems, lost all its autonomous processing capacity. There was in fact a renormalization of procedures within more mobile, more transversal and more efficient information processing systems.

Microcomputers, though ubiquitous in business, had failed in the domestic market for reasons that have since been clearly analysed (they were still expensive, had little real use, and were difficult to work on when lying down). The late 1990s saw the emergence of the first passive Internet access terminals; in themselves they were devoid of intelligence or memory, so that unit production costs were very low, and they were designed to allow access to the gigantic databases built up by the American entertainment industry. Finally equipped with an at least officially secure electronic payment system, they were attractive and light, and soon established themselves as a standard, replacing both the mobile phone, Minitel and the remote control of conventional television sets.

Unexpectedly, the book was to constitute a perennial pole of resistance. Attempts were made to store works on an Internet server; their success remained restricted, limited

to encyclopaedias and reference works. After a few years, the industry was forced to agree: the book – more practical, more attractive and more manageable – was still popular with the public. However, any book, once purchased, became a formidable instrument of disconnection. In the intimate chemistry of the brain, literature had often in the past been able to take precedence over the real universe; literature had nothing to fear from virtual universes. This was the beginning of a paradoxical period, which still lasts today, where the globalization of entertainment and exchange – in which articulate language was of little importance – went hand in hand with a strengthening of vernacular languages and local cultures.

The onset of weariness

Politically, opposition to globalist economic liberalism had actually started long before; it became apparent in France in 1992, with the campaign for the ‘No’ vote to the Maastricht referendum. This campaign drew its strength less from reference to a national identity or to republican patriotism – both of which disappeared in the slaughter of Verdun in 1916–1917 – than from a genuine widespread weariness, from a feeling of outright rejection. Like all historicisms before it, liberalism threw its weight around by presenting itself as an inescapable historical change. Like all historicisms before it, liberalism posed itself as the assumption and transcendence of *simple ethical sentiment* in the name of a long-term vision of the *historical future of humanity*. Like all historicisms before it, liberalism promised effort and suffering for the present, relegating the arrival of the general good to a generation or two away. This kind of argument had already caused enough damage, throughout the twentieth century.

The perversion of the concept of progress regularly wrought by various forms of historicism unfortunately favoured the emergence of *comical philosophies*, typical of times of disarray. Often inspired by Heraclitus or Nietzsche, well suited to middle and high incomes, with a sometimes amusing aesthetic, they seemed to find their confirmation in the proliferation, among the less privileged layers of the population, of many unpredictable and violent assertions of identity. Certain advances in the mathematical theory of turbulence led, more and more frequently, to human history being depicted as a chaotic system in which futurologists and media thinkers strove to detect one or more 'strange attractors'. Though it was devoid of any methodological basis, this analogy was to gain ground among educated and semi-educated strata, thus durably preventing the constitution of a new ontology.

The world as supermarket and derision

Arthur Schopenhauer did not believe in history. So he died convinced that the revelation he brought, in which the world existed on the one hand as *will* (as desire, as vital impetus), and on the other hand as *representation* (in itself neutral, innocent, purely objective and, as such, susceptible to aesthetic reconstruction), would survive the passing of successive generations. We can now see that he was partly wrong. The concepts he put in place can still be seen in the fabric of our lives; but they have undergone such metamorphoses that one wonders how much validity remains in them.

The word 'will' seems to indicate a long-term tension, a continuous effort, conscious or not, but coherent, striving towards a goal. Of course, birds still build nests, male deer still fight for possession of the females; and in the sense of

Schopenhauer we can indeed say that it's the same deer that has been fighting, and the same larva that has been burrowing, ever since the painful day of their first appearance on Earth. It's quite different for men. The logic of the supermarket necessarily induces a dispersion of desires; the shopper in the supermarket cannot organically be the person of a single will, a single desire. Hence there is a certain depression of will in contemporary human beings: not that individuals desire less – on the contrary, they desire more and more; but their desires have become somewhat garish and screeching: without being pure simulacra, they are to a large extent the product of external determinations – stemming from *advertising* in the broad sense. Nothing in them evokes the organic, total force, turned obstinately towards its accomplishment, which the word 'will' suggests. Hence a certain lack of personality, noticeable in everyone.

Deeply infected by meaning, the representation has lost all innocence. We can designate as *innocent* any representation that simply presents itself as such, which simply claims to be the image of an external world (real or imaginary, but external); in other words, one that does not include its own critical commentary within itself. The massive introduction into representations of *references*, derision, the '*meta*', and humour quickly undermined artistic and philosophical activity, turning it into generalized rhetoric. All art, like all science, is a means of communication between human beings. It's obvious that the effectiveness and intensity of communication decrease and tend to cancel each other out once a certain doubt settles on the veracity of what is said, on the sincerity of what is expressed (can anyone imagine, for example, an ironic or '*meta*' science?) The gradual crumbling of creativity in the arts is thus just another face of the very contemporary fact that *conversation* is now impossible. In

everyday conversation, it's exactly as if the direct expression of a feeling, an emotion, or an idea had become impossible because it's too vulgar. Everything has to pass through the distorting filter of *humour*, a humour that of course ends up being empty and turning into tragic silence. Such is both the story of the all-too-familiar idea of 'incommunicability' (it should be noted that the repeated exploitation of this theme has in no way prevented incommunicability from spreading in practice, and that it remains more than ever topical, even if we have become a little weary of talking about it), and the tragic history of painting in the twentieth century. The course of painting thus clearly represents, admittedly more by an analogous atmosphere than by any direct approach, the course of human communication in the contemporary era. In both cases, we slip into an unhealthy, fake, profoundly derisive atmosphere – so derisive that it ends up being tragic. So average passers-by walking through an art gallery must not pause too long if they wish to maintain their attitude of ironic detachment. If they do so, after a few minutes they will be overcome, in spite of themselves, by a certain confusion; at the very least, they will feel numbness and discomfort; their capacity for humour will slow down to a worrying degree.

(The tragic occurs exactly at this moment when the derisive no longer manages to be perceived as 'fun'; this is a kind of brutal psychological inversion, which expresses the individual's irreducible desire for eternity. Advertising avoids this phenomenon, which flies in the face of its own objectives, only by an incessant renewal of its simulacra; but painting retains its vocation to create permanent objects endowed with a specific character; it's this nostalgia for authentic being that gives it its painful halo, and that willy-nilly make it a faithful reflection of the spiritual situation of Western humanity.)

In contrast, we can note the relatively good health of literature during the same period. This is very easy to explain. Literature is, profoundly, a conceptual art; it's even, strictly speaking, the only such art. Words are concepts; clichés are concepts. Nothing can be affirmed, denied, relativized, mocked without the help of concepts and words. Hence the astonishing robustness of literary activity, which can reject itself, destroy itself, declare itself impossible without ceasing to be itself – which resists every *mise en abyme*, every deconstruction, every accumulation of meta-levels, however subtle they may be, and which simply gets up, shakes itself down and gets back on its feet, like a dog coming out of a pond.

Unlike music, unlike painting, and also unlike cinema, literature can thus absorb and digest limitless amounts of derision and humour. The dangers that threaten it today have nothing to do with those that have threatened and sometimes destroyed the other arts; they are much more closely related to the acceleration of perceptions and sensations that characterize the logic of the hypermarket. A book can only be appreciated *slowly*; it involves reflection (not mainly in the sense of intellectual effort, but in that of *looking back*); there is no reading without pausing, without reverse movement, without re-reading. This is impossible and even absurd in a world where everything evolves, everything fluctuates, and nothing has permanent validity; neither rules, nor things, nor human beings. With all its strength (which was great), literature opposes the notion of permanent topicality, of the perpetual present. Books call for readers; but these readers must have an individual and stable existence: they cannot be pure consumers, pure phantoms; they must also be, in some way, *subjects*.

Undermined by the cowardly obsession with 'political correctness', dumbfounded by a flood of pseudo-information that gives them the illusion of a permanent

modification in the categories of existence (we can *no longer think* what was thought ten, a hundred or a thousand years ago), contemporary Westerners no longer manage to be readers; they no longer manage to satisfy the humble demand of a book laid out in front of them: the demand that they simply be human beings, thinking and feeling for themselves.

Even more, they cannot play this role in front of another being. And yet they ought to be able to do so: for this dissolution of being is a tragic dissolution; and we all continue, moved by a painful nostalgia, to ask the other for what we ourselves can no longer be; to seek, like a blinded phantom, this weight of being that we no longer find within ourselves. This resistance, this permanence; this depth. Of course, everyone fails, and the loneliness is excruciating.

The death of God in the West was the prelude to a formidable metaphysical soap opera, which continues to this day. Any historian of mentalities would be able to reconstruct the details of the stages; let's just say that Christianity succeeded in this *masterstroke* of combining a fierce belief in the individual – compared to the epistles of Saint Paul, the whole of ancient culture seems to us today curiously civilized and monotone – with the promise of eternal participation in the Absolute Being. After the dream had faded, various attempts were made to promise individual humans a minimum of being – to reconcile the dream of being that they carried inside them with the haunting omnipresence of becoming. All of these attempts so far have failed, and unhappiness has continued to spread.

Advertising is the latest of these attempts. Although it aims to arouse desire, to provoke it and to *be* it, its methods are basically quite close to those that characterized the old morality. It sets up a harsh and terrifying Superego, much