Introduction to Modernity
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Translator's Note

This translation is dedicated to my mother, Tina Moore, and to my dear friend Sue Harper, whose advice and encouragement throughout have been invaluable.

Except when prefixed (Trans.), notes are from the original. When the source title is not given in English, translations of quotations are mine. Bibliographical details are presented in the original in a somewhat erratic manner, and wherever possible I have endeavoured to complete and standardize this information. However, in a few cases where the source of a quotation has not been specified in the original, I have dispensed with bibliographical notes.
We are more free than ever before to look around in all directions; nowhere do we perceive any limits. We have the advantage of feeling an immense space around us – but also an immense void.

Nietzsche


With or without dignity, sumptuous or slovenly, in plush or in tatters, more and more brutal, more rapid, more noisy, the modern world marches on.

How very pompous – or whimsical – of anyone to require something precise, such as definitions or theories: concepts. The modern should be self-evident. In painting or in music, in technology as in scientific or political life, modernity ought to be obvious to all but the myopic or completely blind. When people say: modern painting, modern music, modern technology, modern love, they think they know what they are saying and that there is nothing more to be said. For most people who take this attitude, changes in ideas and changes in behaviour are correlative. Anyone who utters a doubt or poses a question is immediately branded as not being ‘modern’. He is not to be trusted. He is not ‘with it’, not with the movement which justifies its own existence merely by moving. In any case, protests are just part of the murmur which greets anything new, noises the crowd makes, noises off.

According to this attitude, the new – the modern – has its supporters and opponents, filed under ‘up-to-date’ or ‘old-fashioned’. Passionately accepted or no less passionately rejected, modernity should require no theory.

We will start by challenging this – more precisely, by making a theory of modernity an imperative. We will begin by clearly establishing modernism and modernity as antitheses. By modernism, we mean the consciousness which successive ages, periods and generations had of themselves; thus modernism consists of phenomena of consciousness, of triumphalist images and projections of self. It is made up of many illusions, plus a modicum of insight. Modernism is a sociological and ideological fact. Its pretensions and fanciful projects can be seen in the press in statu nascendi. Exhibitions are mounted to reconstruct it.¹

By modernity, however, we understand the beginnings of a reflective process, a more-or-less advanced attempt at critique and auto-critique, a bid for knowledge. We contact it in a series of texts and
documents which bear the mark of their era and yet go beyond the
provocation of fashion and the stimulation of novelty. Modernity dif-
ers from modernism just as a concept which is being formulated in
society differs from social phenomena themselves, just as a thought
differs from actual events.

Our distinction between them will be confrontational, thereby
enabling us to discover how they relate and to extract the concept
which is taking shape within modernity, but which is as yet incom-
plete. We will therefore think deeply about modernity considered
objectively and as an essence, stripped of the appearances and illu-
sions of modernism.

In our opinion, this distinction is a necessary one. Modernism
has been in evidence for decades, maybe for centuries. From fashion
to snobbery, from illusion to image, this triumphant, triumphalist
consciousness of the new has altered its appearance while never actu-
ally changing; it has a history. The modern world moves forward
preceded or followed by its shadows: multiple crises, ever more fre-
fuent and more profound, inextricable contradictions and
confusions, dramas and catastrophes. We owe the concept of moder-
nity to the contributions of people who have tried to explore these
crises and confusions. The history of modernism cannot be written
without the history of the concept of modernity (and vice versa).
Moreover, at every time and in every circumstance, two conflicting
trends and two rival attitudes are brought face to face: cocksure con-
viction and uneasy uncertainty, arrogance and fear. So that basically
no one is ever sure of anything, and it is not even clear whether the
dispute arises from the past or the future, from yesterday or tomor-
row, from the lessons of history or of a possible world yet to come.
The first trend – certainty and arrogance – corresponds to modernism;
the second – questions and critical reflection – to modernity. The two
are inseparable, they are both aspects of the modern world.

This introduction to modernity does not presume to change mod-
ernism, nor modernity itself. Its intention is not to complete the
theory or to exhaust the concept, merely to demonstrate that the con-
cept and the theory are necessary. Its first goal is to formulate the
concept by demonstrating that for a long time the modern world and
modernism have been submitted to, accepted or rejected, but never
thought. As we map out the territory, we will try to present the theore-
etical processes which, by radical critique, will unmask modernism
while bringing the concept of modernity to full term. In this way we
will reveal their movement and their theoretical and negative aspects
(the most ‘negative’ appearing sometimes as the most ‘positive’, and
vice versa – a point made not with the intention of confusing matters
even before we start, but in order to specify the method: dialectic).

If we are to understand our era – and to call it complex would be an understatement – it is absolutely vital that we construct a set of conceptual tools. In our view this conceptual apparatus is still far from satisfactory, despite the efforts of various theoreticians (who call themselves ‘philosophers’, ‘sociologists’, ‘anthropologists’, etc.), and despite the fact that the theoretical base already exists in Marx and Marxism.

As a matter of urgency we must clarify the concept of modernity which is gestating in embryo in an already lengthy series of meditations by ‘modern’ thinkers on their times, on events and on themselves.

Why the subtitle Preludes? Does it mean that what I am writing is intended merely as an exploration or a series of explorations? No. It means that the themes broached – elements of a general theory – will be tackled only in a fragmented way. And consciously so: they will not form a finished totality, a comprehensive picture or system. What is more: the untimeliness of a comprehensive picture, the impossibility of a definitive system and a complete totality for our times – these themselves will be among the themes. Yet the themes will not be treated in isolation one from the other. They will interweave and correspond, echoing and rebounding from one to another.

An opening prelude proposes irony as a truer way of thinking than modernism’s enthusiastic (triumphant and triumphalist) consciousness, and thereby appropriate for the theory of modernity already present by implication in the processes we will use to define it. We will see that the thinkers of modernity who have contributed to the formulation of its theory since Marx were also ironic thinkers, using irony as a method and as a form of reflected consciousness. Our irony must be defined or redefined explicitly, and we will do this in terms of the opening out of the field of possibilities in the modern world, of their multiplicity, of the necessity of opting and the risk every option involves. In a word: with reference to the aleatory in modernity.

Can the myth of Oedipus reveal the hidden depths of being, of thought and of history? Do the seer who was blinded for trying to solve the riddle and the blind man who in his wanderings became a seer symbolize the philosopher, or even modern man and the modern world? This theme is linked with a broader question: ‘When we modern men reflect on modernity, can Greece still offer us something? In what ways can it help us to understand and to find our way through the vast field of possibilities?’

Does the image of the new life, the countenance of that which is possible, still mean anything? Myth, ideology, utopianism – might this
emotive image be moribund? Are the problems of new towns and modern urbanism giving the new life a new meaning, or are they about to do so?

What was the great creative period for modernity, when or where did it begin, where did it end and why?

What is the meaning of that obscure and ever-debated notion: nature?

Will we move towards a new romanticism, and beyond that towards 'something else' other than art?

Handling these themes in a deliberately discontinuous manner, the author intends to leave to the reader — if he is agreeable — the task of discovering how they relate, respond and repeat, how they interconnect and modulate. But here he will limit himself to saying that the incoherence of these themes, and the way they are handled, is more apparent than real.

That this book is intended to have musical qualities should be obvious. It is constructed like a piece of music. Its wish is to be understood in the mind's ear, to be a cry, a song, a sigh, and not simply to be read as a theoretical and discursive statement. However, the subtitle *Twelve Preludes* in no way implies any kind of reference to music ancient or modern. It is not inspired by Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, or by dodecaphony, although the presence of the number twelve is by no means fortuitous.

Just a few more words on philosophers and philosophy. Like Socrates, whose enigmatic figure dominates many of these pages, the philosopher should devote more time to speaking than to writing, underpinning his theorizing with a dual praxis: teaching and irony, questions and attempts at answers, uncertainty and direction. In philosophy writing is only a second-best. The philosopher's role is to tell, to tell everything, to bring everything into language in the knowledge that language is inevitably inadequate, just as he himself is; and, moreover, that as soon as language aims at totality it becomes compromised, fragmented, blurred. The logos and language are not pure positivity, the positive incarnation of absolute reason. They also contain negativity, and the negative is also the best and truest aspect of the positive. If the philosopher writes, it is in the name of a living word which he has been able or unable to utter. The written word is the shadow cast by speech.

There can be no philosophy without a critique of philosophy and a refusal to 'philosophize'. Equally, there can be no science without a critique of the scientific canon and science in general, no psychology without a critique of psychologism, no history without a critique of historicism. And so on and so forth.
Intrepid, the philosopher crosses the forbidden threshold which bars the way into language. This implies that he must be audacious, ready for challenges, conscious of the ‘No Entry’ sign, conscious of the limitations of accepted discourse and the limitations of language in general.

Thus Socrates brought into language – into a spoken language more alive than the written word – the practical life of Greece’s most mature city, taking it in its totality and not from the bias of immediate utility, as the Rhetors, Grammarians and Sophists did. In his century the logos was prominent on the agenda. Socrates’ scope was wide: contradictions of praxis, the political problems and the incoherent opinions of his fellow-citizens – all were converted into intelligible language and coherent discourse. From the philosophers he learned the power of the logos, from non-philosophers he learned its dangers and deficiencies.

Similarly, more recently, with Freud, sex and its problems have entered into the living word and coherent discourse. In the same way, a century and a half ago, with Marx, so did praxis. Thought breaks through barriers, frontiers, closed doors. It breaks through where language has been forbidden to enter, aware of a curious contradiction at the very heart of the operation. Language and the living word are components of a praxis, and yet they strive to be equal to praxis. Every aspect of praxis must be mediated by discourse. Discourse strives for totality. It must strive for totality, yet it is never more than incomplete. Something is always left unsaid. And when it is claimed that everything can be said, or has been said, then language has reached a crisis point. By giving priority to language we give priority to consciousness, and remain within the framework of the old (idealist) philosophy. We fetishize it, transforming it into an alienated and alienating power, into a thing. We must go beyond language, and even beyond the active word, to find, to discover – to create – what is yet to be said. Everywhere, doors are opening up for language: to dialectic, which has discourse and a critique of discourse as a necessary precondition, to praxis (total and revolutionary, or partial), to problematics, to the dialectic of history and the irony of history, to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in everyday life. The need for coherence, essential though it is, must take second place to the summons of these openings, and must not be allowed to become a fetish.

When Marx takes philosophers to task for interpreting the world without transforming it, he is being rather unfair. In so far as it interprets the world, all philosophy contains a certain attempt at transforming it. By interpreting, philosophers were already superseding
what had previously been accomplished. To supersede philosophy and make it concrete reality is exactly what philosophers wanted to do, although they never succeeded in pushing this aim to its limits.

So now a door is opening for the philosophical logos, and beyond it, the dialectic of supersession is pointing the way ahead.
Socrates, Montaigne, Musset, Heine – what did their irony have in common? Theirs were totally different eras, with different objects, different people. Could the ironic mentality, so elusive, so agile, so unsure of itself and its surroundings, be reborn from age to age, keeping its identity in spite of the changes time brings?

The great ironist appears in periods of disturbance, turmoil and uncertainty, when the people around him are absorbed in extremely large issues, when the future hangs on important decisions, when immense interests are at stake and men of action are unreservedly committed to the struggle. This is when the ironist withdraws within himself, though only temporarily. It is his way of taking stock and recouping his strength. Back out again in the public domain, he questions whether those involved really know why they are gambling with their lives, their happiness or lack of it, not to mention the happiness or unhappiness of other people. Do they actually know they are gambling? Do they know what the stakes really are? For the ironist the actions, projects, representations and men which confront him are like constellations where distances are more visible than the brilliant points they separate; these spaces he fills with darkness. The tasks in hand, even the most valid ones, are not enough to satisfy him. He scans the horizon and tries to weigh up the present. He is the first to perceive the limits of the interests involved and the chances the tactics in operation have of success (while the people who have conceived them feel obliged to believe in them unreservedly, and never to lose face in front of their supporters).

Perhaps one of the functions of irony is to give aggressed or oppressed sensibility a means of protesting against individual alienation. Its strength is mental, which is another way of saying that it is weak. Both intimate and alien, it protests against everything alien and external. Sometimes it comes from outside, from the movement of circumstances; sometimes from within the ironist himself, from his own thought and consciousness. In the first case, the ironist attacks
the world, other people, existing society. He challenges them and rejects them mentally. In the second case, he turns his cruel, bruised strength primarily upon himself; he rejects his own self, and in order to do so he refutes the world and the society to which he belongs. In the first situation, which was Socrates’, irony goes from within towards the outside world, which it distances in order to judge it. In the second, which is romantic irony, like Kierkegaard’s, its questioning of the outside world is of only secondary importance, since the main effort is for the self to become more than itself: to be absolute, to affirm the inexhaustibility of subjectivity. In both cases, irony presupposes the acute consciousness of a conflict. It seeks to aggravate this consciousness, and the conflict itself, rather than to resolve it. The emphasis is different, but both cases share a common situation: a conflict which seems unresolvable, or with an outcome which seems so unpredictable as to warrant expecting the worst.

Irony and humour are close neighbours, but they should not be confused. The Anglo-Saxons have a humorous vision of that enormous ennui which characterizes their social life, and which raises fears for the future of ‘industrial society’. They need this sense of humour; it makes the boredom bearable. Humour can soften a situation, then go on its way. Humour manages to metamorphose the ennui of everyday life – almost. It may fail to transform it completely, but it makes it more decorative, and so henceforth the man who is bored can at least find his boredom enjoyable. He lives a life of well-being without pressing problems and devoid of all romance, and he cannot decide whether to feel comfortable or merely bored, a dilemma for which humour offers him a kind of solution. In any sociology of boredom, the study of Anglo-Saxon humour would bulk large. Humour resolves the conflictual situation, though the resolution is not a lasting one. Irony, of course, would emphasize it. It would reveal the appalling state of all those decent folk who have every reason to be happy (comfort, a multiplicity of satisfactions), who are not only bored but also acutely aware that it is unfair that they should be so.

Sometimes irony veers close to sarcasm, but it is quite different from wit. Wit plants small but devastating explosives in the rock of the social status quo: witticisms. Voltaire was witty rather than ironic; as were Diderot and Stendhal. Irony usually makes us smile rather than laugh, it never makes us ‘laugh our heads off’. Unlike wit, it cannot really mount an attack. Aware of its own weakness, it is always on the defensive. This does not stop it becoming aggressive whenever the opportunity arises. It can irritate giants. It risks their wrath. The ironist is not afraid of setting himself up as a universal agitator – in other words, as an agitator of the universal. His irony is an act of defiance:
weakness defying the powers that be, which are never more than specific powers localized in the hands of specific individuals.

We might call irony the protest of an insecure subjectivity and consciousness, thus a protest by thought in search of itself. We would add: a protest and a search which foresee and expect their own failure, although they do all they can to delay or avoid defeat.

The fact that the greatest of all ironists, Socrates, does not even appear in history goes to show how true this is. It could be argued that he never existed, and that the myth of Socrates was launched by the philosophers of the so-called Socratic school. His challenge (but what was that challenge exactly?) was completely understated. He took dissimulation so far that he disappeared behind it. Distanced, dissimulated, relegated to the background, Socrates might have uttered the odd word or sentence which may have had some kind of effect or other, but was he himself aware of this? A man who conversed with everyone, a man who revealed things, unmasked things, he was himself a man who hid behind a mask. A man who passed judgement, who wanted to pass judgement, he probably also knew that judgement is impossible. Were it not for the great outrage of his death, he would probably have been forgotten. Such is the reverse effect of iniquitous judgements (but are there such things as judges, and are not all judgements more or less iniquitous?). Perhaps true justice comes from the outrage judgement provokes, and is done only in the aftermath of that outrage. (This proposition can be reversed. Perhaps true judgements come only from the outrage all human justice provokes.) Thus the path of truth passes via dissimulation and, even worse, via defeat. The ways by which error and illusion and untruth are unmasked are devious: disguises, fictions, patience, waiting, lucid circumspection, truth and the will towards truth defeated.

A protest by subjective lucidity, irony is valuable only in so far as it supersedes subjectivity. Socratic irony, at any rate. It intervenes in a situation. It is not knowingly useless and empty, and it is not merely a movement up out of nothingness and back again. It has an object to aim at, immediate or distant, on the level either of knowledge or of action. Irony cannot stay alive unless it has a certain direction to move in; it cannot admit to itself that it exists until it has opened a door on to the universal: until it has superseded itself and drawn attention to that supersession. Socrates insisted that he knew nothing, and this was his way of bringing what he did know out into the open, together with the received knowledge of the people around him—decent folk, ordinary and positive, with contradictory opinions (and these decent folk thought they knew everything, so they needed making fun of just a little if they were to confront each other and see that all their knowledge
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consisted of was contradictory points of view which had to be verified, if indeed any of them contained any truth at all!). As for Montaigne, he reiterated ironically that neither he nor anyone else would ever know anything for certain; this was his way of deploying an incomparable human experience which encompassed a great deal of knowledge (and indeed, Montaigne's knowledge was certainly much more extensive than the knowledge deployed by contemporary disciplines which imagined themselves to be so solid and established).

The ironist is an actor in the drama of not knowing and of false knowledge. He is acting a part. He wears a mask. And in this way he separates actors from their masks. His words are false (and he knows that they are false), but their goal is the truth. He acts out alienation in order to disalienate himself and others. He assumes this role of the villain and, if necessary, pretends to be behaving in bad faith, but by a process of dissimulation he supersedes bad faith, as well as superseding that crass and simplistic phenomenon, genuine or assumed, known as 'a clear conscience'.

In a delightful book about irony which he wrote before the advent of the grand dogmatisms of the moment, a contemporary philosopher, Vladimir Jankélévitch, points out that after every period of dogmatism comes a period of irony. Dogmatism triggers off its own opposite and conjures up its own opponent. This idea would be even more accurate were one to insist that irony can spring up at the same time as dogmatism, that the one does not follow the other like cause and effect, like sobering up follows a drunken spree. Irony springs up with dogmatism, watches it inflate, waits for it to burst.

During the course of their history, the Greeks tried out many philosophical and political possibilities. They founded the city and attempted to create a state. They experimented with a wide variety of ways of relating theory to praxis (including rhetoric, sophistry, dialectic), but in each case the two remained in relation to each other, thus emphasizing an awareness of the antagonism between the two terms. They even attempted to solve the opposite problem philosophically, using speculative, logical and ontological method. They sketched the outlines for the ultimate system, the doctrine of being (Eleatic ontology). As for Socrates, instead of affirming or opposing assertions, he confronts them. He does not choose between the immutable ontology of Parmenides and the dialectical fluidity of the Heracliteans, any more than he chooses between democracy, oligarchy, tyranny, the state or the absence of a state. He says loud and clear that he does not know – or rather, that he knows that he does not know. This is a dialectical position and a dialectical proposition. The Socratic ironist does not choose between 'knowing everything' and 'knowing
nothing'. He knows something, and first and foremost that he knows nothing; therefore he knows what 'knowing' is. He speaks the language of knowledge. He has reached the stage where the instrument of knowledge is already established and well under control, but as yet it has no firm object. Socrates stands at the starting line – the 'base' or 'foundation' as it is sometimes called. By saying that he knows nothing, he is disguising his divine knowledge (Rabelais dixit!). He pretends to know nothing, he is lying; yet he is telling the truth: what he knows is virtually nothing. It is merely the beginnings of knowledge: curiosity, amazement, a questioning rationality. It is the mere possibility of knowledge: logic and the logos, discourse and the awareness of discourse as such. Socrates wants to know more. He argues and seeks, pointing out the path which leads towards 'knowing more'. He takes part in conversations. He plays a role. Dialogue does not end dissimulation. It is at one and the same time dissimulation and revelation for both participants, the questioner and the questioned.

To counter the partisans of Heraclitean flux, Socrates will point out the stability which men have achieved, desired or maintained through knowledge, willpower and action – objects and things, their classification by species and genera, techniques, skills, the city and its constitution, society, concepts and virtues, ordinary people and great minds – saying to becoming: 'That's where you must stop. Treat us gently. We're respectable people, so show us some respect!' To counter the Eleatics, Socrates shows that nothing is completely solid, that everything decays, changes and passes away. He points to movement, and smiles. It is not being that he points to, but unknown possibilities and impossibilities. Where is movement going? Where in this moonlit world will becoming lead us? Socrates' questions receive contradictory replies, and because they are contradictory he confers a philosophical meaning on them. He reminds those who are intoxicated by movement that becoming destroys as much as it creates, and that the Dionysian dance is not always a round (a cycle or a circle).

If he moralizes, he does so as an ironist. If he claims to be immoral, it is to safeguard morality or perhaps to discover a new morality. Every position or proposition harbours an opposite, which will sooner or later reveal itself, revealing in turn all that is questionable and defective about its fellow. To everyone, for everyone, Socrates points out both his contradictor and the validity of the contradiction. He undermines established certainties because the things which seem to be so perfectly what they are, and so solid, and so very much 'things', doing their job of being things so well, reveal their own fragility. At the same time, men reveal their deficiencies and their illusions: their limits.
Socrates attacks no one; he never pokes fun; he is not witty. He is not frivolous. He never makes jokes. He ironizes. With him the owl-goddess, chaste, crepuscular Athene, unfolds her wings, leaves the twilight and circles above the agora in the full light of day; there she comes to earth; she treats those she loves and protects somewhat harshly, because they are ignorant and unthinking. These citizens have their possessions, their wives and their children, and the city, as well as the objects Socrates refers to when he talks to them: pots, horses, hair, youth or maturity, experience and opinions. They do not know that destiny threatens their possessions. If the Athenian Greeks are to preserve the things they are proud of or happy with, something new is needed. What? Does Socrates know? No. He knows only that it is imperative to find a new truth and a new way. If he knew what they were, he would not say that he knew nothing. He would teach the new truth. As he does not know it, the only available way is the negative way: the way of irony. Socrates is aware of the threat which is hovering over the city, but also of the obscure presence of truths which are striving to be born and by which Athens and Greece might well be saved. He is enigmatic, but not in the manner of the Sphinx. He is of the city, a man and a citizen. And it is the city, which has become an ensemble and a living rationality, that he questions. Nor is he like Oedipus; he has no ready answers to give, and the death sentence is the only answer he will ever receive. He will never become king of the city. His only powers will be mental. It is Socrates who asks the riddle: ‘What is man?’, and Socrates who supplies the answer. Realizing that no answer is perfect or convincing, he lapses into silence. He supersedes both Oedipus and the Sphinx.

Socrates inaugurated a new period for thought: a critique of what has been accomplished, an exploration of what is possible and impossible, and two thousand years of maieutic (too frequently mislaying its secret ingredient, irony), two thousand years of creative philosophy, of philosophy condemned to powerlessness and death.

Irony and maieutic cannot be separated. The Socratic thinker is an obstetrician. Whom does he help to give birth? A society. Birth to what? The future she carries inside her. In an uncertain – but certainly conflictual – situation, the ironist treads a trail which knowledge has failed to blaze. Irony is not sterile, although it is not irony which gives birth or generates. If the fruit is to see the light of day at its mother’s breast, it must be helped, and the mother must be helped too. This is where the maieutic ironist comes in. The negativity of irony ‘reflects’ a deeper negativity. There is something risky, something hazardous, about fertility. The mother risks her life (more or less) and her health. Will the baby be all right? Chances are it will be, but one can never be
sure. And then again, adds the ironist, there are hysterical pregnancies, and miscarriages. And again, human affairs always step wrong foot forward. So irony does not stand in opposition to dogmatism, like abstinence to pleasure and the younger generation to the old. It too is in search of a truth, but not the same truth as dogmatism. It is a 'contingent' or possible truth; therefore, possibly, impossible. The game has changed, as have the stakes, and the rules of the game.

The people who have studied Socrates are legion, and yet the enigma remains: the silence of Socrates (if in truth he ever spoke, he certainly left not a single line, not a single word of which we can be sure) and his death. We can write whatever we choose about him, the best things and the worst. Socrates is the universal scapegoat. Conversely we can see him as a saint, a martyr, a pagan Christ, a secular Christ. It all seems like some inexhaustible fiction, a living symbol, a collection of anecdotes or legends which we can interpret in whatever way we please, and the meaning of which derives from the inexhaustibility of its expressive richness. As Labriola wrote of Socratic studies: 'Ricerca mai esaurita'.

If we look closely at discussions about these themes – Socrates, Socraticism, irony and maieutic – we will become aware of a pseudo-problem which is constantly cropping up. It consists of asking oneself whether Socrates actually held the ideas which have subsequently been attributed to him (him of whom we know nothing) after century upon century of transpositions and interpretations. Sceptics like to see him as a perpetual doubter, and nothing but a doubter. Value philosophers find, a posteriori, that he was the instigator of value philosophy; while partisans of rational and logical concepts praise him as the inventor of the concept, formally categorized as such. For some, Socrates was the righter of wrongs, the 'guardian of pure intellectuality', and consequently the leading apolitical or antipolitical figure of his time. But equally one can maintain that 'after Socrates politics becomes the jewel in philosophy's crown'. Pedagogue? Corruptor of the young? Creator of philosophy as distinct from poetry, religion, politics, art – or antiphilosopher who refuted ontologies? 'Solo dancer to the glory of God'? 'Tragic hero' (Kierkegaard)? Or purveyor of antitragic rationalism, harbinger of decadence (Nietzsche)? And what should we think of his 'daemon'? God or devil? Soul or spirit? Genius of revolt, Promethean spirit? Inspired by the arcana of mysticism? Religious or rational? Introversion or communication? Spirituality or rhetoric in the service of an ill-defined social practice? Birth of consciousness or death of spontaneity? Dreamer? Sophist? Ideologue? Philistine roué? Rake? Pure hero? Of Socrates everything can be said.
There is only one feasible answer: Socrates did not know where he was heading, where the city was heading, where thought was heading, where Greece and the ancient world were heading. Subsequent philosophers, philosophic writers and historians of philosophy thought that Socrates knew everything and was merely pretending not to know. Therefore they believed that Socrates used his maieutic and his irony to extract his own truth from the minds and opinions of others. Now maieutic can be seen as having two facets. The person using it is trying to bring his own truth to light together with that of other people. When he says that he is looking for something, he is not pretending. While conversing with other people, he is also holding a conversation with himself. Thus irony is not a mask for self-satisfaction, the self-satisfaction of the man who knows, who is already familiar with other people’s lives and what they contain, caught up as they are in the division of labour, shaped by their city, torn apart by conflicts of interests, passions and opinions. Anyone as calculating as that would have concealed his great and definitive knowledge, convinced that he was right and always would be right. But perhaps Socrates really did not know what was to emerge from Athens and from Greece. Perhaps he was afraid of some unspeakable miscarriage, or of the birth of some monstrous creature, of some ghastly, intolerable truth. Marvel or demon? Was not he, Socrates, the inevitable herald of what was to come, this new dawn or this final twilight?

He imagines what is possible, every possibility. He seeks what is possible beyond the horizon of possibilities, maybe even the possibility which will swoop down from heaven to earth like some bird of death. Maybe he will have preferences, but he does not know which possibility will come to pass. He seeks to understand in order to see ahead. He has brought the life of the city, social and political praxis, into language – the logos. He has revealed their contradictions, their uncertainties. He is happy merely to ask questions. He questions himself. He seeks. He wants to know where the world is going, the world he witnesses around him. But fearing the worst, he wants silence. He wants death.

At this point irony changes course. It doubles back upon itself. The ironist mounts an attack on the world in order to unmask it; but he is afraid of what lies behind the mask. So he turns the attack upon himself. What is he getting involved in? And what can he possibly do about it? Why should the destiny of the city and of society be of any concern to him? Why live, for that matter, and why die? Why attach so much importance to the obstetrics of a truth which may be ill-conceived, terrifying, and which would be best ignored? Would it not be best to say nothing at all? These are decent folk, unaware of what they
are carrying deep in their souls – why torment them? Were they to become aware of uncertainty – their own uncertainty – they could not go on living. They cannot, they must not know. Yet one day the thing will happen. The thing will be born. Athens will witness its own demise. And Greek beauty will die, and wisdom too. One day it will become clear that the feeling of personal dignity and freedom in the city was partly an illusion; that political society, the city, had more freedom than its citizens, and that the unity of the political state and of civil society made men’s private lives more subservient than if they were slaves. Formerly, men with a stake in silence and ignorance would have killed the poor and humble midwife of hard truth. Why did the judges condemn Socrates? Because they wanted the truth? No. Because they were afraid of it and wanted to avoid it. Because they suspected that it would be a terrible truth, a truth they did not want to see. Because they wanted their truth, and because Socrates belonged to no party other than the party of uncertain truth. Because Socrates thought that he was nursing a deadly truth, and knew that because of this he deserved to die, and that he wanted his death to be as unjust and as just as possible. Maybe the Socrates of Plato’s Dialogues had the answer to the riddle: ‘... my reputation... is only as an eccentric and someone who confuses people.’ To embarrass those in power is to deserve to die, to accept death.

Nowadays, in the mid-twentieth century, only men of violence, army chiefs, generals, political soldiers and Party men can claim the historical role of society’s midwives. They alone can help in the birth of whatever society is carrying within its womb. Philosophical ambition – supposing that Socrates had it – becomes ridiculous. Maieutic has ceased to be the province of the specialized, professional philosopher. Now it belongs to everyone: writers, artists, architects, political activists, the masses, the classes. Maieutic is broadening its spectrum. And it is precisely because of this that we find ourselves in the Socratic situation once again, but on a much vaster scale. So-called modern societies, with their transitional character (towards what?) on the point of breaking up, are pregnant – with what? Where is ‘modernity’ heading? What will be born? A dream become flesh, or a monster? We simply do not know. We know that the child will be born, that perhaps it has been born already, within us, around us. We also know that we must formulate the most disastrous hypotheses (atomic annihilation, technocracy and cybernation on a world scale, frantic cosmic adventures) in order to maintain our vigilance and lucidity. We know that optimistic hypotheses (like this one for example: the France of tomorrow will be the new Athens, the Greece of modernity) will probably appear naïve. And finally we know – and this is the most important
thing of all – that the possibilities are determined; even if we retain an
element of the unexpected, of chaos, of catastrophe, we can count the
number of possibilities there are; the field of the aleatory is immense,
but not absolute. Consequently, opting is crucial. It has a role to play.
More precisely, we cannot tell in advance the role opting may have,
our option, my option, yours. Therefore we have to opt rather in the
way we have to vote; world maieutic is linked to democracy and to
irony. And in order to opt we must distance ourselves, we must stand
back.

Even if the beautiful child of our dreams (Communism, the
Communism of the utopian and the scientist reconciled at last) may
yet be born, would it not still be a good thing to experience uncer­
tainty, to recognize uncertainty so as to enhance our appreciation of
this present moment of becoming? We need irony. Without irony, we
all become embroiled in acts of faith. Blind trust is sometimes associ­
ated with devotion, but mostly it goes hand in hand with stupidity.
Either the Manichaeism of ‘all or nothing’ (which does not exclude
the Machiavellianism of compromise!), or irony and mediation. Of
course, those who put a knife to your throat and cry: ‘If you’re not
with us you’re against us’, the same people who condemned and
killed Socrates, do not like irony. For there is something salubrious
about irony. It gives subjectivity renewed value, and helps to make it
an active force again. More importantly, it helps to prepare for that
happier moment when differences will be important again, those dif­
ferences which are so often discarded in favour of synonymy. Any
theoretical and practical method which seeks out differences – dif­
ferences of all kinds, between individuals, groups, peoples, cultures –
as a means of modifying lifestyles and ways of thinking must have
irony and negativity.

How enjoyable it would be to make a personal intervention here,
and to address you personally, dear reader, geneigter Leser, or you,
chère lectrice, gnädige Frau. I would begin on an informal note, but soon
the tone would become more sublime; I would ask you if you had ever
experienced those hours when everyday life produces a malaise, when
the mind pursues an idea which it dares not confront.

In diesem Reiche, das uns der Geist so oft, wenigstens in Traume aufschliesst, ver­
suche es, geneigter Leser, die bekannten Gestalten, wie sie täglich, wie man zu
sagen pflegt im gemeinen Leben, um dich herwandeln, wieder zuerkennen . . .

In this realm into which we are so often ushered by the spirit, if only in our
dreams, try, dear reader, to recognize the familiar forms which move
about you constantly in what is called everyday life . . .
Yes, I would really enjoy talking to you like this, soul to soul. However, I shall refrain from doing so, and I ask you politely to take note of my reticence. So reticent am I that I will leave you the task of discovering the author of the above passage. But to give you a clue, I shall tell you that he is a well-known old romantic. And I have no desire to follow the path he is taking. His is an irony which strays into subjectivity, thus into shapelessness, and I reject it. I, who am chatting to you, I am. . . . Hang on! Who am I? Oh, excuse the lapse of memory. I'm a Marxist. I have an unshakeable belief in the existence of the outside world, in the objective laws of nature, in dialectical waves and corpuscles. A thousand pardons, I almost left out the most important thing: I believe in the objective existence of nature prior to consciousness and thought and mind, outside of them, without them – an omission which would have been severely condemned, whereas now the little sentence has been uttered I find myself elevated to the heights of philosophical genius. But suddenly I feel very awkward about all this. I accept the existence of the earth – our beloved planet – prior to human beings, of the solar system prior to our earth, of the 'world' and the 'universe' prior to the sun and its satellites. And now, worthy reader, *digne lectrice*, who is to say that I am not a rabid Stalinist, a crafty, blinkered politician, a Formidably clever and active ‘crypto’? How can I prove to you that I’m not? By the insults the Stalinists heap on me? Think about it. How clever, how really clever of them: to have agents who attack them, whom they shower with insults, but whom they control and who serve them *‘perinde ac cadaver’* in the shadows. . . .

Dear reader, *digne lectrice*, why did I hesitate to intervene subjectively? Who am I? Perhaps I don’t even exist, me who’s talking to you (à la Zazie-Queneau). Perhaps I’m nothing more than a robot remote-controlled by the enemy (but what enemy?) or built by the devil to confound the good, the beautiful, the true, the worthy – in other words, to confound you? But are you sure? In fact, are you sure of anything, really, completely sure? This is where irony begins, another irony, the new one. . . .

The old romantic irony was based on ‘I’ and ‘me’. How are we to live in perpetual bliss and harmony? How can we transform harmony into a way of life, into something ‘lived’? Impossible! Romantic irony was born of this impossibility, disguised it, then launched itself in search of supreme harmony all over again. But all it found was a series of dissonances before the final, ever-fugitive cadence.

Romantic irony scaled nature down to the dimension of the self (pardon the pun: nature as an ‘ego–Lego’ kit) and went on to represent the self as nature. Thus the self it defined was one which plays charades, a self merging with nature which itself plays charades with
the physical appearance of things (playing and struggling with these appearances and phenomena, the divine spirit – nature and truth – becomes synonymous with the philosopher’s, the artist’s, the poet’s spiritual self). This irony aspired to the perfect ‘I’, the possible, impossible ‘I’: creative activity in the abstract.

From this point on this creative, overselfconscious activity becomes introspective and is in danger of neglecting the work of art itself, and of never expressing itself in action. It deludes itself, becomes whimsical and complacent; it wants only to be charming, irritating (provocative, challenging), pleasing. Once established in this way, subjectivity cuts itself off from practical activity, and atrophies. The ironist’s mind sees itself as the absolute creator; it identifies with the being its own imagination conjures up, with God, a diabolical God who toys with the world and creates for fun, or as if in a dream. For such a mind, this is the last word, the word which was in the beginning, and at the end. Spurred on by the demands of his own consciousness, the romantic ironist attempts to bring forth this subject–object, the pure I–Me, inexhaustible in the diversity of its differences. By a process of reduction, the serious becomes flippant and work becomes play, and soon irony is taking its own jokes seriously. It finds itself trapped up a blind alley, facing a definitive dilemma, insoluble because the conflict has been eliminated: in one corner the belle âme, in the other the cynic, face to face in irony’s pure mirror, hating each other, complementing each other, destroying each other. This irony starts its journey from within and emerges on to a void: nothing, not even nothingness. It begins to crumble away to dust. So finally it gives in and admits defeat; after many a noisy outburst against the Philistines, the ironist turns bourgeois. Or else he commits suicide.

The instant as opposed to time and eternity? The instant freeing us from the deceptions of all that is solid and durable, from gravity and its absurdities, from the abstract ideal just as much as from solidly established reality? Its lightning flash illuminating enormities, great, massive entities, huge immobile forms, and dispelling their mystique? Yes and no. Merely to shed light on them is not enough, one must try to begin dismantling them. As for the greatest irony of living, is it not to be found in the vivid contrast between the instant (which disappears forever and ceaselessly returns, forever fleeing and forever reappearing in its headlong flight) – and the moment (which comes back, but never quite the same as it was, as I would like it to be. For I don’t want it to be different, what I want is for things to be repeated . . . )?7

If we reflect ironically we will perceive how little irony philosophers have had, and Hegel less than anyone else. He recognized
without irony the ironic cunning of history, which corrodes the figures of consciousness, announcing their demise when they are at their peak and maliciously preparing for it, carefully hiding their own supersession from their eyes. Hegel left irony to the romantics, whom he relegated - not without justification - to the realm of subjective idealism. For Hegel, time is a restless force, but in the final analysis it never destroys anything substantial. In truth - that is to say, in absolute truth, in being or spirit - everything is preserved and everything accumulates. If it is true, as Hegel maintains, that things and men step worst foot forward, this is but a small facet of men and things. No room for irony, and no real negativity. The negative merely attacks appearances and superficial modalities in the appearance (or 'emergence', to use contemporary jargon) of details; despite the serious attention Hegel devotes to it, it remains superficial. Hegel thought he had brought maieutic to its final term; the birth over, he cradles the beautiful child of history in his arms: the system, the only son of the philosopher's God. Irony has had its day, along with dialogue, dissimulation, and the gradual revealing of the path that must be followed. We - the philosophers - embrace being at last, and our method grasps it as a whole from birth to maturity, in one fell swoop.

There is a kind of Hegelian humour when philosophers muse with self-satisfaction and pity over the laborious efforts of the past, all those agonizing labour-pains. It is the powerful, pedantic and heavy-handed humour of someone who conceives, gives birth, groans with pain and cries with joy all at once: father, mother, God. For example, when Hegel has the temerity to proclaim that the constellations have no more importance than a rash, or when he confronts the mountains, crying: 'Es ist so! It is thus! . . . '. This is black humour, completely unfunny, and it accompanies the universal solution: whatever the problem, eliminate it. Irony, however, will emphasize whatever is problematic.

Sometimes Hegel goes further than this. He tilts at satisfactions, including those satisfactions on a social or national level which see themselves as limits to history, and thus pose a threat to philosophical satisfaction:

The powerlessness of life shows itself in that the beginning and the result are separate. So it is also in the lives of individuals and of nations. The determined National Spirit is nothing more than an individual in the march of World History. Within each people a fruit is ripening. The activity of each people consists in fulfilling a principle, not in taking pleasure from it. On the contrary, the juice of the fruit is bitter; and they cannot reject it for they have an infinite thirst for it. Now this brings them
destruction, followed by the advent of a new principle. The fruit becomes seed once more.\textsuperscript{8}

For Hegel, fulfilment is also loss. Plenitude slips away. There is ‘Verwirklichung’, alienation within and because of plenitude. Here we are in the realm of black humour, and there is something profound about it. To seize this profundity completely, all we need do is to apply the Hegelian schematic to the concepts of colonization and decolonization. We also enter the realm of irony when we consider the infinite thirst which drives the fools of history ever onward in search of that fruit with its bitter juices. For Hegel, only the ‘World Spirit’ can be trusted, for it is the ‘World Spirit’ which exploits and deceives all those who ignore it and fail to adopt it as a goal.

Marx understood how profound this Hegelian conception and concept of the universal were. He took them even farther. By giving negation back its revolutionary power, he introduced irony into history and into the concept of world history. Through the irony of becoming, he achieved true dialectic. As did his comrade Engels. Basing themselves in the social sphere, which they saw as the true principle of politics and history, and in class, which they saw as the true principle of political economy, they revealed the objective irony of world history, which brings men something other than that which they expected or wanted. Hegel’s merging of dialectic and prediction (connected to a philosophy of history, an ontological and historical determinism) collapses. It was a sterile bonding, which nullified dialectic, mimeutic and irony, along with true becoming and the truth of becoming.

Writing about the events of 1848–52, Engels said:

It really seems as though old Hegel, in the guise of the World Spirit, were directing history from the grave and, with the greatest conscientiousness, causing everything to be re-enacted twice over, once as grand tragedy, the second time as rotten farce, Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre . . .\textsuperscript{9}

Marx condenses, develops and corrects this. History never repeats itself completely, but proceeds by analogies and homologies:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce . . . Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly
confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise. . . .

So, from the basis of what is determined, history creates the unforeseen; it never repeats itself; and nothing demonstrates this better than pseudo-repetitions. For Marxists, the Hegelian cunning of the idea in history becomes the objective irony of history acting within subjectivity. This irony comes from the fact that ‘men’, social forces and ideas, masses and individuals, act in ways contrary to their intentions; and moreover, they express their actions by ideologies, signs and symbols which are frequently misleading. Sooner or later even the best-laid plans will come to grief; such is the law. There is always an element of the unforeseen in history, even though history is not absurd, devoid of meaning, undetermined. The foreseen and the unforeseen, chance and necessity – these are the constituents of dialectical movement in history, and doubtless in nature too: the determination of becoming.

Marxist irony is a moment of consciousness and knowledge – not the highest moment, but not the least important either. It came into being at its appointed time; it could not have been born earlier. This objectively based irony converts the cunning of reason into something relative and historical. It sweeps false consciousness to one side. Let us list some of the modalities of false consciousness: dogmatisms, mystified mystifications, derisory localizations and focalizations, impeccable dichotomies and logifications (of the ‘all or nothing’ kind, some formal, others affective), stereotyping, experience-proofing, egocentrisms, mechanisms of ideological production and identification, an entire intellectual teratology. In its blazing path irony destroys the bases of the man-thing and the thing-future, reification and alienation, technology-worship and the cult of the machine, which apply the characteristics of organization and calculation to human actions and carry them to the absolute.

A fine plan of action, inaugurated by Marx and still in full swing, despite enormous difficulties. For today, Marxist irony cannot limit its attacks to the bourgeois world alone. It must also be directed at those who claim to be Marxist, but who ignore Marx’s irony.

Today a new tragedy or farce is about to begin – but where will we hear the curtain-call? Irony asks the question, and awaits a reply which
it does not know and cannot give, for only the unforeseeable – which motivates irony – holds the answer. All we know is that Stalin followed in the footsteps of the great revolutionary Lenin, yet compared himself to Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky. The tradition of the state ‘weighed like a nightmare on the minds of the living’. And the revolutionaries whom ‘history’ condemned to shuffle their feet and slacken the rhythm of total creation, yes, they too cloaked themselves in classicism, making what was thinkable and what was possible synonymous with reality. Furthermore: Stalin invented ideologies – and Stalinism still has plenty of them up its sleeve – which were capable of ‘demonstrating’ that the new was born of the old by means of the forceps of the state, whereas according to Marx and Lenin, the new should be the end of the state. Stalinists ‘demonstrated’ and are still ‘demonstrating’, directly or indirectly, that the child of history is in a marvellous state, a perfect or almost perfect infant, exactly the one we were all waiting for. Because the being thus defined and ‘demonstrated’ reflected itself in knowing, coinciding with theoretical and practical method and dispelling appearance and illusion in favour of absolute seriousness, Marxist irony has been ipso facto ‘physically liquidated’. Men can do what they want because Stalin did what he wanted. The prehistoric age of mankind has come to an end, and true history is beginning. Society is already transparent, and the total man has been achieved, or almost: he is within reach, and so is being, and material being.

Let us immerse ourselves once more in Marxist irony. Let us go back to the beginning again. Let us reread texts like the following, which admits us to the corridors of bourgeois society (and not only bourgeois society!) by the back door. It sums up Balzac, prefigures the detective novel and, moreover, as a bonus, destroys at base level the fetishism of material production (bourgeois or socialist ‘productivism’):

A philosopher produces ideas, a poet verses, a parson sermons, a professor textbooks, etc. A criminal produces crime. But if the relationship between this latter branch of production and the whole productive activity of society is examined a little more closely, one is forced to abandon a number of prejudices. The criminal produces not only crime but also the criminal law; he produces the professor who delivers lectures on this criminal law, and even the inevitable textbook in which the professor presents his lectures as a commodity for sale in the market. There results an increase in material wealth, quite apart from the pleasures which the author himself derives from the manuscript of his textbook.

Further, the criminal produces the whole apparatus of the police and criminal justice, detectives, judges, executioners, juries, etc., and all these
different professions, which constitute so many categories of the social division of labour, develop diverse abilities of the human spirit, create new needs and new ways of satisfying them. Torture itself has provided occasions for the most ingenious mechanical inventions, employing a host of honest workers in the production of these instruments.

The criminal produces an impression now moral, now tragic, and renders a 'service' by arousing the moral and the aesthetic sentiments of the public. He produces not only textbooks on criminal law, the criminal law itself, and thus legislators, but also art, literature, novels, and the tragic drama... The criminal interrupts the monotony and security of bourgeois life... The criminal therefore appears as one of those natural 'equilibrating forces' which establish a just balance and open up a whole perspective of 'useful' occupations.11

Do we need to emphasize the functions of this irony, its 'multifunctionality'? It reveals certain hidden depths in social practice much more effectively than economism, sociologism, psychologism, and all the other so-called Marxist schematics of 'base' and 'superstructure'. It reminds us that the word 'civilization' means in particular the prosecution of criminal – or presumably criminal – cases by law, civil law, something which was previously dealt with arbitrarily by the executive and political powers. Today this irony is no longer adequate, for there are not only true crimes but false crimes, crimes designated as such by those in power and investigated by means of interrogation and torture, a step backwards from the rules of 'civilization' acquired in the eighteenth century. Marxist irony reminds us that trials and tortures like this can deeply modify a 'civilization' and undermine its foundations.

Long before he wrote this deeply ironic text, Marx launched an attack on Hegel which went on to reveal some of his most profound ideas:

The modern ancien régime is merely the clown of a world order whose real heroes are dead. History is thorough [die Geschichte ist gründlich] and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form to its grave. The last stage of a world-historical form [weltgeschichtliche Gestalt] is its comedy. The Greek gods, who already died once of their wounds in Aeschylus's tragedy Prometheus Bound, were forced to die a second death – this time a comic one – in Lucian's dialogues. Why does history take this course? So that mankind may part happily from its past. We lay claim to this happy historical destiny for the political powers of Germany.12

Even if we no longer share in this happiness, and are forced to admit that comedy does not succeed tragedy but mingles strangely with it,
Marx’s thinking is clear. His is a robust, intellectual irony, based upon the irony of history: a history which goes to the heart of things.

Turning to the process of economic accumulation, the diligent reader will find that Marx and Engels give another extremely curious example of that irony which Engels, going even farther than Marx, called ‘unfathomable’. The religious orders in the Middle Ages were historically the first communities to realize the conditions for accumulation. Peasant communities produced little, and any surplus left after the small amounts used for their festivals went to lords, masters, conquerors, princes or states. As for the city, it was too broad, still too close to the archaic community, too much geared towards extravagant expenditure, to be able to accumulate. It follows that a more restrained community, an association of active individuals in which the individual in charge can command work and abstinence, would seem to be a historical condition for accumulation. (And according to Max Weber’s specifically ideological studies, is this not what the Protestant family achieves?) Because of their status the religious orders were able to eliminate most of the social modalities by which excess would normally be consumed: women, children, the family, the army, profanely sensual festivals. The religious orders constituted themselves as groupings of individuals with full and active powers, submissive to discipline and renouncing individual possessions and excessive expenditure to the benefit of their group. Apart from several mendicant orders, these religious communities adopted an economic status; they developed techniques which were highly sophisticated for their time. Thus a famous order such as the Cistercians established its abbeys on marshy terrain and in lowland valleys, which the monks were able to farm once they had been drained.

Irony! In the name of a vow of poverty, the orders became rich. And so they degenerated. They had to accumulate, without knowing how or why. With wealth came power and decline. The root of the irony – if we can call it that – lies in the unawareness of the process and in its inevitability rather than in the wealth per se, which in fact permitted the creation of magnificent and irreplaceable works of art.

Irony! To counter the ‘Weberians’ and their examination of the ideology of rationality and ‘pure’ culture, and in spite of Marxist dogmatists and certain adversaries of Marxism, we would take great pleasure in envisaging some kind of revival of this area of study (the conditions for accumulation), beginning with a history of the religious orders. It would help fill a gap in those chapters in Capital which deal with the origins of capitalism and the beginnings of the process of accumulation, a gap which has been pointed out by the Reverend Calvez in his book La pensée de Karl Marx.
If specifically and genuinely human history begins with the end of the social mystery, with the transparency of society and human relations, with the mastering of processes, it also begins with the end of irony. While there is irony, we are still living in the prehistoric age. And we are not out of it yet. . . .

To understand the significance of Marxist irony, we must understand the history of Marxism itself ironically, seeing it as a fragment of the prehistoric era of man and a *transition* towards history.

Once more, let us sum up the things we can be sure of. Marx’s thought and radical critique announced and prepared the way for the end of ideologies (and consequently the end of religions as well as of philosophical systems); but then it transformed itself into a doctrine saturated with religiosity: the ‘cult of personality’. It began by identifying heightened democracy with dictatorship by the proletariat and the withering away of the state, but ended up as a state doctrine. In the industrially backward countries, the revolutionary thinking which announced an end to all human alienation – religious, moral, philosophical, economic, political – through the totally renewing intervention of the industrial proletariat became a theory of government which concealed the human price that would be paid for industrialization and accumulation, and rendered the concept of human alienation virtually powerless.

Radical critique of all dogmatisms has therefore produced a new dogmatism, no less rigid and ossified than the old ones. The critique of representations of history which presented it as the work of exceptional individuals – kings, generals, geniuses – has produced the cult of personality. The critique of old philosophical systems has brought about a new system, which speculates about ‘matter’ just as the old systems speculated about ‘being’ (and is more preoccupied with waves and corpuscles than with man as a given material being in a determined social praxis which needs to be analysed critically and exposed, regardless of its political denomination).

And so on. We could go on listing the signs and facets of this astonishing reversal.

Oh irony! The official Marxism of the Stalinist period consisted of a limited number of philosophico-political statements which virtually turned it into a Church doctrine. Infallible, the authorities defined what was orthodox. Heretics were weeded out and executed, without even a nod to the secular channels of justice. It interpreted the holy texts. The masses and the militants had access only to carefully expurgated compilations (the ‘Vulgate’, as Edgar Morin called them). Underpinned by the repressive apparatus of a powerful state, the method of authority – so strongly criticized by Marx – became
unexpectedly vigorous and rigorous again. From that moment, the
cult of Stalin was indistinguishable from political religiosity. The
Stalinist doctrine did not claim to be transcendental revelation, but it
was remarkably like it. It expressed itself through taboos and prohibi­tions. No problems, except minor ones. A sacred history no one was
allowed to touch. Myths. And then little touches of piety: offerings
and gifts, prescribed rituals and ceremonies, atonement and initia­
tions, acts of humility and abnegation (usually christened with new
names: autocritique, for example . . .).

In a word, those who witnessed this metamorphosis of a great
thought into its opposite are still astounded by it. It happened slowly
and insidiously, so that it is impossible to attribute responsibility for it
to any deliberate plan or volition, to Stalin or to any other political
leader. Such was the magnitude of this historical phenomenon that it
must have taken place in conditions which were themselves historical,
and which we do not completely understand as yet. All along the line
it was accompanied with justifications. Was it not inevitable that if a
great revolution was threatened on all sides, it should fight its enemies
both outside and within? Was it not natural to honour heroes and cel­
brate anniversaries? Was not that the practice in all the advanced
democracies? Was not disagreeing with this tantamount to opting
against revolution, against socialism? Most amazing of all is the fact
that this perverse process and the true extent of its perversity have
become apparent only now that it is completed! The things the
‘Secret Report’ revealed went far beyond anything the most fanatical
adversaries had invented, far beyond the worst ‘slanders’.14 For more
than thirty years, confused and potent notions – ethical and religious
as well as political – were used and abused: the notion of fidelity (and
infidelity), of friend (and enemy). Unconditional fidelity became a
supreme value and standard, and the ‘faithful’ found it difficult to
realize that their attitude was debasing the very values which they
held most dear. Such an attitude verges on religiosity. The institution
provokes its own deterioration, but it masks this by demanding belief;
one single process is at work, immobilizing doctrine and disguising
this immobility by secreting the illusion of life over its frozen sur­faces.

‘But in that case Marxism no longer had any meaning! Its own
success has killed it off!’ Such is the conclusion which certain – pre­
sumably clairvoyant – minds have thought fit to draw from the facts.
But it is not that simple. And here is a second paradox, even more
astonishing than the first. If it is true that dialectic, Hegel’s and
Marx’s, studies contradictions, transformations, reversals of perspec­tives and situations in history, then does not the metamorphosis of
Marxism stem from Marxist dialectic? If it is true that Marx’s radical critique denounced the consequences of the state, state power, reasons of state, while explaining state institutions by historical conjunctures, how could it be that the conditions and implications of a state which claimed to be based on Marxism should escape from Marxist dialectical analysis? If there is an irony of history or an irony in history, as Marx has so often demonstrated, is this not the place and the moment to be ironic?

In other words, we have not heard the last of Marxism. Dialectical irony alone can situate and define this extraordinary phenomenon: a pseudo-religion, a political religiosity, an antireligious religion. Marxism has become Marxist religiosity, an institutionalized state ideology, a religion; and only Marxism can undertake its fundamental critique.

On the surface, religion appears to have changed, while official Marxism has adopted the appearance of a religion. Official religion gradually discontinued its relentless appeals to faith, revelation and transcendence. It became – or, more precisely, became once more – an overt political power, a political ideology, the inspiration for Parties and states. While Marxism – a critique of all ideologies and states – was transforming itself into a state ideology, religion – which had once aspired to transcend ideologies and states – was cashing in on the historical and political experience of twenty centuries; this was, and remains, its way of relating and intervening, of becoming real, human, of compromising. Thus if Marxism has compromised itself by becoming a pseudo-religious ideology, religion has compromised itself by becoming a political ideology and a pseudo-religion as well. If religion has exerted pressure on Marxism, Marxism has forced religion to take up the challenge: bringing an inverse, reciprocal pressure to bear. We cannot separate the facets of this dual movement: a critique of religion forced to establish a political strain of the sacred – religion forbidding critique and desecrating itself in political events and realities.

Thus the great political forces confronting each other in the modern world mask it with a human face – our face. Even at the height of their fiercest struggles, they occupy the same territory, the same ‘world’ – our world. How could they confront each other were it otherwise? Such is the fate of ideologies when they attempt their own critique; such is the fate of the withering away of ideologies as prefigured by radical critique. Ironically, with its tit-for-tat challenges and shifts in alignment, this confrontation has not made them wither, it has made them more extreme.

Faced with a choice between the ultrarevisionism of those who
insist that Marxism is exhausted as a current in modern thought, and the ultradogmatism of those who seek to perpetuate the results of the Stalinist period by pretending that its deviations were just a minor hiccup, we can therefore discern an alternative way, the way of dialectical critique, the way of irony.

Institutionalized and consecrated Marxism enjoys a privileged situation compared with religions. Religions are always faced with two rivals: on the one hand, a world of magic, on the other hand, a secular world, profane, profanatory. Religions have to defend themselves against trespass. They proceed via commandments, which they adorn with moral merit badges, and promises of rewards in a distant future. For their ‘thou shalt’s’ and ‘thou shalt not’s’ they use a sacred language, the preserve of the initiated, who render it into demotic for the faithful.

State-controlled Marxism, the official ideology of a society devoted to economic growth (and very literally ‘devoted’, in the religious sense, practical though the objective may be), is no different from civil and secular society. It does not have its inevitable desecrators waiting on its margins. The damned, the excluded – revisionists, deviantes on the Left and on the Right – are ejected and deprived of any means of expression or action by the state, which is indissolubly united with orthodoxy. Magic, the sacred, the secular, the profane are all brought together until they are indistinguishable. The consequence: ideology has been able to effect a relatively unhindered entry into ordinary language, and has even become a social language.

This is one of the most astonishing phenomena of our times, and one of the most difficult to understand, although it is very simple. Contrary to current belief, Marxist dogmatism is no longer brutally imposed on the consciousness of individuals and social groups (trade unions, Parties, associations of one kind or another). It is introduced from within, through terminology and vocabulary, through the linking of words and concepts, through a grammar and syntax to all intents and purposes completely its own. There are turns of phrase which correspond to actual ways of thinking and behaving. Words and connections between words act as a filter for feelings; they supply rules for reasoning and slogans for action. The same process occurs in every society and every culture, but Marxism is perhaps the first ideology to infiltrate language without actually being a separate jargon or a language which would be incomprehensible to those members of the society who had not learned it. It is true that to an outsider the language of official Marxism seems like an insufferable jargon. Some Marxists who understand it and dislike it (in Poland, for example) refer to it as ‘wooden’. Certainly, it does not lend itself to literature or
poetry. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently flexible to remain a part of ordinary practical language, while offering different registers, ranging from plain style (editorials, propaganda leaflets) to high style (political pronouncements).

Thus the Stalinist period has left lasting traces which no ‘Secret Report’ could ever erase. Marxist language – in other words, the official Marxism which has become a language – has objectively determinable characteristics. In particular, it is a language not of information, but of decision. The presentation of motives and arguments, of facts and information, is reduced to a minimum. The transition from reflection to political judgement is immediate. Facts and values become interchangeable. The language uses the logic of decision-making. The strategy worked out from the basis of an empirical evaluation of balance of forces and possibility is translated immediately into orders for action. This language says what must and must not be said and done, given the balance of forces. It reduces the gap between conception and execution to a minimum (especially when theory is defective and ideology diverges to a substantial degree from current practice). Thus there has never been a political language to match it; it elevates political strength to the level of the quintessential sacred power: the power to decide destiny. Its lack of style in the aesthetic sense endows it with style of another kind: the style of politics as an absolute.

For ‘us’ Western rationalists, the language we use is, on the contrary, laden with purely informative elements. It painstakingly weighs up the pros and the cons, the rights and the wrongs, the good and the bad side of things and actions. It counterbalances contradictory arguments – dialectically. It is excellently suited to discussion, and hesitates before passing judgement; it is particularly reluctant to make decisions. It uses logic in an ‘objectivist’ way. It prefers signifying to deciding. Although in its way the language of politics as an absolute does signify – that is to say, it does command types of behaviour – ours tends to carry signifying _per se_ to an absolute, making a fetish of it. As a result, any dialogue between East and West (and this holds true for non-orthodox Marxists too) is highly problematic. It is all too easy to accuse orthodox Marxists of insincerity, of duplicity, or simply of repeating their tedious catch phrases parrot-fashion, whereas in fact they are speaking their language and using the words at their disposal in all sincerity. For their part, if ever a dialogue gets off the ground, they are quick to impute the same failings to their interlocutors.

A language such as this acts directly on actions and ways of behaviour. It gives orders, without the necessity of appealing to any transcendental reality; it requires no reflection (although it implies a
certain type of ‘reflection’ in another sense). Let there be no illusion about it. This ideology and this language have an indisputable superiority. No state, no statesman in the capitalist countries, has any political implements comparable to these, regardless of whatever their shortcomings may be on the level of literary or philosophical expression.

How did this metamorphosis from theory and science into a language come to be accepted by virtually a whole society? We repeat: Marxism had to correspond to certain needs essential to a society in full economic expansion. Given that principle, a whole number of points in the story remain elusive, for what we are beginning to glimpse is an entire history. One thing to note is that Marxist language has spread far beyond the frontiers of so-called ‘Communist’ society, and has started infiltrating ‘bourgeois’ society.

After a lengthy period of critical and relativist rationalism, official Communist ideology has re-established the notion of the absolute and the unconditional. It has done this on the political level, thus realizing Hegel’s speculative dream, but in the realm of praxis. This was achieved under Stalin. Since then, by an even more bizarre and audacious process, this quasi-religious feeling has been deflected and transferred on to technology.

And the current face of Marxist ideology? It is a boundless, unrestrained enthusiasm for technology. Such faith leaves Anglo-Saxon empiricism and cautious European rationalism far behind. In such a vision, humanism and technology bond in an unproblematic unity, together with a feeling of the cosmic. Once more, latent religiosity is turned upside down. Starting from the view that nature is infinitely material, we move to the idea of unlimited human control of nature, which is scarcely distinguishable from political control of men and the historical struggles which divide them. In a process of mutual reassertion of their respective values, this worship of technology is passed on to the feeling of nationhood and the notion of a social regime, and back again. Ideology sees the power of technology as a kind of virtual infinity, a genuine infinity compared with the ‘bad infinities’ of traditional religion, as Hegel put it. By acquiring this power, men organized according to the new social structures which have been appropriated to the demands of technology will be able to begin conquering the cosmos. Thus worship of technology is a way of eliminating humanity’s awareness of its own finiteness. And this is why we may define it as religiosity transferred to new objectives.

From this point of view, any doubt that technology and humanism are not closely linked is a mortal sin.

In his megalomania Stalin plotted gigantic operations which were
intended to alter the face of the planet; under the organization of socialist power, men would change the course of rivers, move mountains, modify climates. The great exploits of modern technology came just at the right time to appropriate Stalin’s dreams, inflating them and giving them a reality and a new meaning. Interplanetary rockets, artificial satellites, the exploration of the universe are no longer dreams, and yet they excite the imagination in a way which allows for certain seemingly pressing problems to be avoided or temporarily shelved: the transformation of everyday life, man’s appropriation of his own specifically human powers (desire, for example), the metamorphosis of the social environment (by means of a new art or concrete poetry, or by something other than art or poetry): everything which had been essential to the Marxist project!

Marxist ideology becomes a grandiose ideology of struggle and power, in the vaguest and widest sense of the word, and even includes the assault on the universe. It thus involves a new truth: the ‘world-wide’ changes meaning. Contrary to the opinion of some of the thinkers who have attempted an overall assessment of our epoch, it no longer has much to do with the ‘planetary’. Twentieth-century man, modern man, has superseded the planet for the universe, and is becoming aware that the planet is a finite world.

Finally — and we cannot overemphasize the importance of this latest reversal — unforeseen values are emerging from official, institutional, ideologized and ‘consecrated’ Marxism. These values are Promethean and Faustian and demoniac — in other words, essentially antireligious, although they stem from a diffuse religiosity and operate via a transfer of this religiosity. Socialism is already living out its modernism and its modernity. It is experiencing the conflicts between them, and will go on experiencing them.

Institutional Marxism still has a ready-made answer for every problem: unconditional optimism, faith in the future. Socialism, already more vigorous and growing at a faster pace than capitalism — which is all right and proper — will soon win the day. Already the balance of power, the appreciation of which determines world strategy, is tilting in its favour. Socialism has no problems left (apart from the odd detail and the occasional necessary alteration). Notably, it brings with it, and contains within itself, a moral code. This code can be summed up in a few words: love of work (and work well done, fully productive in the interests of socialist society), love of family, love of the socialist fatherland. A moral code like this holds the essential answer to every human problem, and its principles proclaim that all such problems have been resolved. One virtue it values above all others: being a ‘decent’ sort of person, in the way that the good husband, the good father, the good
workman, the good citizen are ‘decent’ sorts of people. Any deviation from behaving in a ‘decent’ way will be easily identified as a crime against society – in other words, against the state. What characterizes this kind of social ethic is not that it seeks to eradicate all offences, but that it draws attention to them and arranges them in a hierarchy. It involves a rigid conformism, defined by the values, norms and regulatory behaviour patterns of (socialist) society. In this way, and beyond all hope, it accomplishes the moral project which the religious and secular ethics of ‘Western’ societies have failed to achieve: the perfect adaptation of the individual to society.

Hence a no-less perfect contradiction. For some, this is human development at its highest. For others (including, of course, the author of these lines) it is a parody of complete human development as foreseen by Marx.

The first demand of dialectical irony is that whoever pursues a moral project of this kind and fails to succeed in it should recognize their affinity with Marxist ideology. It demands that moralists be coherent, whatever their persuasion, that they should all recognize their own reflections in Marxist ideology, that they should stop attacking it for squalid political reasons, since in their heart of hearts, because they aspire to virtue, they must approve of it. They must cure themselves of their bad faith. For it is surely the height of bad faith not to recognize something that offers you your mirror-image and answers all your prayers: moral order!

To conclude, let us sum up (for the area under review) the world situation, contemporary history and the concomitant history of Marxism:

First movement. – Marxism takes power only to degenerate to the level of a religious ideology, but deflected and transferred towards the state and politics as an absolute. In line with Marx’s own analyses, ideas are determined by the level of the productive forces – in other words, by the power man wields over nature. In a society where economic and technological development is weak, ideology inevitably becomes tinged with religiosity, and moreover, it is an ideology only in the ordinary sense of the word.

While Marxism degenerates in this way towards religiosity and moralism, religion itself adapts to the conditions of the modern world and becomes an organized social force, a political institution. Thus ideologized Marxism and anti-Marxist ideology stand face to face, confronting each other on the same level, in societies which oppose each other but find themselves at more or less the same level of development.

Second movement. – Promethean and Faustian values emerge from
the heart of ideologized and ‘consecrated’ Marxism, as the society for which it has become the superstructure and the quasi-religious ideology expands economically and technologically. These values contain something new, something unexpected, something unforeseen.

And maybe this is the greatest paradox of all. The crisis of Marxism, its difficulties, its momentary deteriorations, already contain its greatest victories (perhaps! . . .).

Question (which the reader cannot fail to ask): ‘What gives you the right to talk in the name of official Marxism, the Marxism you call “institutional” and are so critical of? You call yourself a dialectician, an ironist, anti-establishment, a partisan of radical critique. You represent only yourself, and you’re not a spokesman for any social or political force. Well, what are your problems, and what solutions can you offer?’

Reply. This is precisely where irony appears in its true light, with all the frailty from which it draws its strength. Official Marxism is skilled at organizing its own publicity (known as ‘propaganda’). But it is incapable of self-knowledge, and even more incapable of self-exposure, in the sense of openness. If I may be permitted to pun, really to expose oneself in this way one must be capable of exposing oneself (in the sense of being vulnerable and not being afraid of losing face and, above all, of appearing infallible to one’s devoted and somewhat blinkered followers). Therefore, only Marxist irony can expose the becoming of Marxism in the modern world, opening it to the light of day, in all its objectivity. It is an essential aspect of the modern world, it has supplied its logos (its discourse) together with a series of effective representations and plans for action. Furthermore, dialectical irony does not wear any particular expression, unless it be a certain smile at the extraordinary tragicomedy of our lives and the fabulous and ludicrous metamorphoses of modernism and modernity. Does dialectical irony refrain from offering precepts? Does it avoid the search for a sort of wisdom? Perhaps not. We shall see.

Meanwhile, dialectical irony would gladly reactivate the initial project of Marxist thought. How can the world (the earth) be changed so that objects become objects of enjoyment (and not objects of power), aesthetic realities, or transformed by art (rather than technological realities)? But irony labours under no illusions. If history, which is still at the prehistoric stage, decides otherwise, if it follows another tack, then irony will not remain stubbornly anchored to nostalgia . . .

Marx’s irony is enjoyable, but so is Heine’s. It is not circumscribed by romantic subjectivity. However, one good thing about the latter is that it affirmed subjectivity with unrestrained vigour at the moment when the modern era was about to dawn. With Heinrich Heine, the
badgered individual and his bullied consciousness manage to convert their weakness into strength. Using a powerful acid, irony corrodes the heavy burden oppressing and alienating individual consciousness.

The aim of this protest and this refusal by the inner man is to go beyond the outer world of ‘things’ (what blood-chilling expressions: ‘things’, ‘things will never change’, ‘that’s how things are’, ‘that will teach you a thing or two!’ . . . ) to address certain wider realities, asking them to move nearer to the possibilities the poet is reconstructing from a realm which has seemingly become impossible. Ironically, the poet demands that they be once more worthy of his tyrannical love; he claims the right to poke fun at them as soon as they fail to be worthy of his exaltation or his love. This irony wears its contradictions with pride, and with lucidity. Thus Heine used poetry as a yardstick for revolution, but he preferred justice to poetry, he even preferred a future which he feared might destroy poetry and beauty, and art. In his Preface to Lutèce he has no hesitation in writing: ‘I freely admit that although it is so contrary to my interests and inclinations, this Communism casts a spell on my soul which I cannot resist.’

But what kind of oaf was Heine thinking of when he sang about Atta-Troll the bear? Whom did he have in mind in the insolent epitaph he attributed to a famous bard:

Atta-Troll: bear with a cause
Moral, pious . . .
Primitive sans-culotte of the forest.
Dancing: bad; But strong opinions
Borne in his shaggy bosom . . .
Talent, none; but character, yes!

I do not know who Heine was getting at, but I know who he reminds me of: the 1960s fool (in the name of Stendhal, who must be turning in his grave, it’s time this fool had his portrait brought up to date). The 1960s fool is a moralist. He dances the graceless dance of ontology and morality. He is respectable, respectful, devoted. He is devoid of irony. He preaches. He is a clumsy conversationalist, and he knows what he is going to say in advance. He is successful. He has a career. He confuses character with truth. He isn’t stupid, not in the least: he’s a fool. He could well be an important fool, a political fool, a philosophical fool, a technocratic fool. Well, there you are. Whatever state you live in, one virtue above all others will always be required: being ‘decent’ (as Hegel put it). Well, there you are. Among all the rotten farces and festivities our era has to offer, there is one which never closes: the festival of the ‘decent’ fellow. Being a ‘decent’ fellow is all
the rage. Once there was kudos in being witty; now being ‘decent’ is the thing. Some claim to be ‘decent’ because they have stayed staunchly Communist (in spite of Stalin, etc.); others because they have abandoned Communism; some boast of having kept all that filth at arm’s length, all in the name of being ‘decent’; while yet others boast that they are not ‘anti’ (in spite of Stalin, etc.); and again, there are some who boast of being strictly ‘anti’ for the same reasons. Above reproach, every one of them. Each of them wallows in triumphalism in the name of being a ‘decent’ fellow, which allows him to say things which smack of blackmail: ‘Decent folk are with us!’ – a statement which can be immediately inverted to: ‘Only people who agree with us are decent ...’. Decent, my eye, as our honest little Zazie would have said. Being a ‘decent’ fellow has become a profession of faith. Or a profession, full stop. Virtue has become a substitute for talent. Take any author, journalist, philosopher, statesman. Talent, none; but ‘decent’, yes! And how much better that is. And the public – it can be talented, brilliant, stupid. But what we all want is a ‘decent’ sort of public. (Here I am, laughing, but I’m a ‘decent’ sort of man, intellectually, and I’ll shout my profession of faith in being ‘decent’ from the rooftops; I find it spectacularly annoying, but there you are, I’m trapped. I’m a man of my time, just like you. And if I said I wasn’t a ‘decent’ sort of man, I know a few people who would take my word for it. . . .)

We are up to our necks in ‘the world of respect’, an idiocy of the Year of Our Lord 1960. Today there are so many worlds in the world that one more won’t make a difference, so I’ll add another, the world of respect: the world of the state and of bureaucrats who cannot stand irony, the world of being ‘decent’, which turns a blind eye to public or private immorality. And it’s nothing new. Moralism, the moralism of moral order, has always gone hand in hand with immoralism. Being ‘decent’ as a general and generally accepted virtue has always gone side by side with cynicism as a type of general reality and consciousness. The one disguises the other, completing it, making it bearable. Will cynicism one day become the humour of this ‘decent’ society? Will we treat our po-faced ‘decency’ in the same way as the Anglo-Saxons deal with their traditional boredom? Could that be the road we will travel, the French road to ennui?

Today irony relates directly to history. It bases itself on history and protests against history. It forestalls it, explores it. History is progressing less and less without consciousness, knowledge and will. One could go so far as to say that it is discovering and revealing the insertion of human will and consciousness into ‘being’; henceforth it will subsume both the history of consciousness and the consciousness of
history. The tendency of history to unite these two could really bring
the prehistoric age to a close. However, this unity is far from being
fulfilled. If tactics and strategy have left the domain of techniques for
action and intuition so as to become a part of scientific knowledge, in
practice their development is still far and away above the human
masses (and their consciousness) which are implicated by their prog-
nostications but play no active part in them. History still draws people
on against their will. Moreover, in this they (people without power)
are neither innocent nor guilty. Both necessary and inevitable, history
and politics can be understood only as alienations, followed by
attempts at disalienation by means of a heightened, more effective
consciousness. Although politics is still an essential mediator in the
process by which the prehistoric age must be continued, accom-
plished and superseded, this does not mean that political power per se
can be accorded any degree of authenticity. Moralizing categories
are suitable only to powers which, by definition, have no interest in
them. The natural, social and ‘spiritual’ forces have not yet been
brought under control – far from it. Furthermore, complete control
of them would surely be only a limit to infinity, an idea, like that of
consciousness achieved, or of the total man. If this is a reasonable
assumption, it follows that words like ‘determinism’ and ‘necessity’,
like the word ‘destiny’, are not about to lose their meaning.

What precisely do we mean when we talk of an irony of history?
Could there be a malignant power – destiny, that evil spirit – which
enjoys thwarting men’s calculations, which whispers to some the
secret of discomfiting others, and the secret of bringing about unfore-
seen events, pleasant or otherwise, to everyone? Should we believe
that history has god-like powers, the power to dream, to work evil,
crazy powers beyond anything man can do?

No. No more than I have behind me another self which prompts
me on what I say, or on the idea I struggle to express in words. No.
There is no evil spirit, no devil in history (although the image of the
devil may have proved useful to embody that strange power and that
power of strangeness which have wrought havoc throughout the
length of history). There is no cunning Reason concealed within the
reason of individuals. But if there is not, does this mean that individ-
ual reason is fundamentally absurd, purely irrational, totally random,
totally meaningless, totally without direction or orientation? Could
the myth of Oedipus contain an absolute truth? Is the moment of rev-
elation, when man finally glimpses the answer to his own riddle, a
moment of criminality, the revelation of his own crime and the pro-
logue to his own blinding? Could the seer be the blind man, and
present blindness the sign of clairvoyance to come?
No. If reason is not everything, it is nevertheless something. It is active. It conceives. It progresses in its own way. It sees. Step by step, it solves problems. It answers questions, one by one. In the process it solves certain enigmas. Continually emphasizing the proletariat as a social force, and the idea of revolution, it even imagines that the outcome of historical actions and the intentions of their protagonists are moving closer together.

From this progression, which in our desire for rapidity we find so sluggish, irony is born. The irony of history is irony in history; it cannot resolve the problem of history itself, but it formulates it acutely. It defines the attitude of the man who sees himself as part of the 'problematic' of history, who is ready for all eventualities, the best and the worst, and who attempts to calculate the odds. It defines the attitude of the man who becomes aware of the aleatory. (Which assumes that the random is not absolute and absurd. It is relative. To what? To a necessity, itself relative.) To put it another way: if there is irony in history, it is because there is such a thing as history, real history, with unforeseen tragedy and comedy. Conversely, because there really is history and the aleatory, there is such a thing as irony.

In so far as it suppressed history and reduced it to the level of a film scripted and shot by some hidden and omniscient director, historical determinism is bankrupt.

The new, the unforeseen, come into being from inside that old bag of tricks known variously as destiny, man's history or prehistory, chance, historical determinism, economic determinism. Just like a ship, history can drift off course. If the captain and the helmsman fail to calculate and correct this drift, the crew will soon realize how far from port they are. Such drifting is due not only to the complexity of the causes or to ignorance of them, but also to objective chance.

The unforeseen implies something new (and vice versa!). Yet the new, the newly produced, the newly created, does not come about just anywhere or anyhow. It is born. It is born and it grows up under specific conditions. It is therefore impossible to categorize it with philosophical or pseudo-philosophical labels such as 'absurd', 'irrational', 'undetermined'. Yet the new can never be fully foreseen. If it could, how could it be called new? It is not always immediately apparent, and frequently it assumes a humble and informal guise. It brings new contradictions; it cannot be deduced from any supposedly absolute law of dialectic; and that is what dialectic is. The new can be disappointing; reality and concept will not always coincide. Ideas and men will always surprise us, as will events. Could supersession obey the formal law of 'all or nothing'? Never! Or the moral law: 'Good or evil'? Again, no. To this day, ideas and men still change into their own
opposites, but not completely, for if they did, then tragedy would dominate our century’s agenda, and irony would no longer find a foothold; there would be no place for it. By a process of metamorphosis, freedom becomes oppression, justice injustice, revolution against the state a new and even stronger state, dialectic fresh dogmatisms, public decency private cynicism. But not completely. Sometimes – though not always – a small piece is missing, or something minute is preserved, and this is enough to change the nature of the situation and our interpretation of it, giving us hope or plunging us into despair. We must make do with the ‘almost’ and the ‘just a little’, but we must never stop being demanding. History is a series of crossroads, slow, patient, multidirectional. Hope was violent. Thus ends the contest between irony and tragedy – not with the hearty laughter of freedom or spontaneity, but with something more subdued and somewhat bitter: the laughter of irony.

Stalin is dead; Stalinism is collapsing; now and only now can we scan this work of history in its entirety, with its successes and its failings, its grandeur and its poverty, its highlights, its shadows, its limits. Only now can we confront it with the hopes of the golden years of world revolution, with Marx’s thought. But at precisely this same moment Stalinist dogmatics are attempting to fix Stalinism and raise its status; their dogmatisms forbid the questioning of anything about the past, except for details. Conversely, on the other side, in the other ‘camp’, everything is open to question, even revolution itself, revolution in the past, revolution to come. So once more ‘all or nothing’ wins, that logical, imperturbable, moralizing principle which refuses both dialectic and irony. Once again we are threatened with a world war. Everything becomes frozen. We stand up to be counted. We count our allies. People strike fixed and threatening attitudes; they prepare for battle and drape themselves in principles they only half believe in, if indeed at all. They become living statues, like photographs for posterity; warlike postures, military rig, military trophies. Everything becomes reified, the final stage of alienation. Everything becomes immobilized. So everything begins to disintegrate. Ideas, ideologies, men, constructs, institutions are all so exploited by systematizations, dogma, abuses of authority, half-successes, half-failures, publicity coups, wars at varying temperatures, that they have become totally discredited. What beautiful targets for subjective irony they are, these many-sided facets of objective irony. The former does not reflect the latter, it takes it over! This gives irony a sense of direction: it blazes a trail towards newly disclosed horizons, revealing, creating. Those ideologies which aspire to ‘totality’ without ever achieving it leave fissures through which irony can slide, widening them as it goes.
And if the ironist himself has doubts about how effective this is, dogmatists hold it in awe.

Dramatizing is a potent means of psychological and political action. It makes every instant seem decisive; it demands an unqualified struggle in which the future of history and destiny are at stake. 'The future is in your hands, and if what you want and desire does not come to pass, then it will be your fault.' With this ongoing dramatizing, neither men nor the process of becoming can ever be innocent. Everyone is guilty of everything. Before breathing its last gasp, traditional philosophy bred the religious myth of the separation of power from responsibility. Irony, which often reveals the dramas hidden within the (apparently) insignificant and anodyne, dedramatizes the self-dramatic. Dramatizing is a characteristic of the tragic. It distorts consciousness and life. Irony deflates it as a thorn bursts a balloon. For some people that is unforgivable. The ironist keeps his head clear, his eyes steady and his breath sweet. He will laugh and quote Lenin: 'We must build on interest, not on enthusiasm'. Much of Stalin's work – too much of it – was built on enthusiasm. And this (but not only this) is what produced Stalinism, the cult of personality and their subsequent collapse.

What makes such enthusiasm possible? The ability to stand up to irony. Hence the necessity for irony, and for the anger it provokes.

But to return to history. A 'foundation' for objectivity in the area of knowledge about human reality and action can be sought at various levels. The man who is not satisfied merely to interpret, but employs reflection, can start by observing things and laws, posited – or, rather, formulated – as absolutely objective. This is the most superficial level, although it is easy to see it as the most positive. Objective investigation can also start from a school of thought – the ideology of the Left, for example, or the negative and critical trend: objectively and positively, this will take it further. It can also formulate itself on the basis of a social force – the working class, for example. But it can go even further if it finds a final basis and an ultimate authority: social development; in other words, history. Now at last the theoretician can try to demonstrate that these 'bases' or 'foundations' have a unity.

But somehow the will to be absolutely objective (and consequently, dogmatic) never manages to secure itself an absolute 'foundation'. Thought is hesitant. Only by an act of faith can it go beyond its own confusions. It asks questions, it questions itself (if it is 'decent', that is). It comes up against impenetrable processes, with their structures and laws: demographic growth, economic and technological expansion, the development of knowledge. At the same time, it observes that these highly complex processes, the relations of which are still a
mystery, constantly produce original situations. There is no determinism, only determined processes, and these are constantly being blocked or saturated. They are just as much products of man as producers of the human and of dehumanization. Men create them and struggle against them. Into the gaps between these objective and quasi-autonomous processes slide uncontrolled and uncontrollable subjectivities. The interference between these processes is complicated by the tangled web of tactics and strategies, conceived by human consciousness and reflection, and spun by human will, which is superimposed upon it. Nature and history, spontaneity and culture, society and humanization, these are terms which can never coincide and can never be separated; they diverge only to find themselves face to face again, on a collision course. The ways chance and necessity can combine take us by surprise every time, and this makes the question of the relations between 'being' and 'consciousness', between necessity and freedom, a singularly complicated one.

And the working class? It exists, but not as the solid, certain ground, the absolute criterion for action which dogmatists pretend to believe in so firmly. The working class is looking for its own way as well. It makes choices. It opts and commits itself through these options. Because of the working class, the invention of certain tactics and operational strategies becomes a necessity; but although it uses these strategies, it is never anything more than an element within them.

And history? Social evolution? Development? They are heading somewhere, but where? Theirs is a difficult, winding road, much more so than Marx and Lenin ever imagined, even when they took evolutionism to task for disregarding the accidents of becoming. Thus irony places objective thought at a certain level, neither the highest nor the lowest. It avoids having to choose between pure relativism and eternal ideas (among which some people would gladly include the idea of revolution). Irony does not do away with the problem of objectivity. It offers a provisional solution, on its own level. It situates thought and the 'thinker'. And that is already quite a step.

Objectivity is experiencing a crisis, and relativism is scoring points in consequence. Some take formal cognizance of the shortcomings of history – in other words, of determinism. They no longer believe in objectivity. Others will do their utmost to stand up for objectivity, on the ideological level. (For example: whether or not the theory of absolute poverty coincides with the facts, scientifically speaking, is irrelevant. Apparently it goads the working class to action; it maintains the cohesion of organisms; and in any case, if it were factually proven, there would be no merit in accepting it, as it could no longer be a
proof of one’s blind faith! Therefore one insists that it is a totally objective theory. . . . ) And again, there are others, cautious and neutral, who hide behind ‘objectivism’, that wishy-washy way of gaining acceptance and insertion into existing society.

Irony fits into none of these categories. Nevertheless it takes every aspect into account, including relativism. It notices that in laws there is a certain ‘give’ (using the term in the sense of the looseness of components in a machine), and that in men’s lives there is considerable ‘give’, but also considerable ‘take’. It is like gambling, with its risks, its stakes, its wagers. Sometimes knowingly, often unawares, men gamble their lives, and naturally, other people’s lives as well. They find this an extremely profitable activity, but it is even more so for the modern ironist, who distances himself and yet feels, and knows, that he is ‘concerned’.

And maybe this kind of objectivity goes deeper than the objectivity of knowledge which considers itself pure and purports to contain an absolute. This is the way irony can gain access to objectivity. Taking the difficult, winding, uncharted course of history as its basis, it is never detached or disinterested. It does not rule out ‘taking sides’ – choices, options, positions. On the contrary, it emphasizes the necessity of a practical option, the need to choose between the various possibilities. But it still bears in mind the fact that opting supposes and introduces an aleatory element. In any conflict or action, failure is always a possible outcome: it is always one of the possibilities.

So by superseding the purely subjective aspects of romantic irony, and the brutally objective irony of Hegelian reason (but closer to the former than to the latter), we may find ourselves back again in the same situation as Socrates, but only up to a point, since that situation has become more complicated and more extreme. . . .

When Pericles tried to unite Greece around Athens, was he destined to fail? Was it preordained?

Had he succeeded, it would have altered the course of history. The seeds Greece bore within would have germinated, instead of dying, or deteriorating, or experiencing several centuries’ delay. Economic expansion (the process of accumulation – that crucial determinism which conditions our history but which can function only in historical conditions) would no doubt have taken off in and around the Mediterranean. It is certain that Athens would have supplanted Rome, and Christianity would have been very different indeed. . . .

A posteriori, we have every justification for emphasizing the many reasons and excuses for this failure: conditions in the ancient world, in the Greek city-state, in Athens (slavery and the concomitant separation of practice and theory: the division between a servile and a free
workforce) – the strategic and political difficulties of the endeavour itself.

Yet its failure was not preordained. Pericles' endeavour could have succeeded. Pericles was neither a hero nor a madman, he was a politician. He gambled. He bet on a possibility. He used his reason to conceive the most far-reaching strategy possible at that time. Around him, because of him, by him, Greek reason took shape, with its certainties and uncertainties, its categorical assertions, its problems. The period had its philosopher: Socrates, a philosopher without a system, a man in the vanguard of everything which had been attempted hitherto, and who was perhaps already superseding philosophy itself.

I repeat: today we find ourselves back again in the same situation as Socrates, but only up to a point, since the Socratic attitude is defined by the importance and seriousness it attributes to the aleatory, by the multiplicity of the possibilities it conceives and the way it explores them, by its inability to give an unequivocal answer to the question: 'Where are we heading?' We are heading somewhere. History's waters have broken. Possibilities multiply, they hem us in. Socialism is possible. But the risks are terrifying. And in any case, what is socialism?

To understand the past we cannot see it exclusively in terms of the past, we must also see it in terms of the future. Marx demonstrated this, as did others. But if what is possible is not certain, if there are several possibilities, how are we to consider the present? With a certain irony.

Irony allows us to emphasize what has been achieved (historically) by challenging it. By revealing the irony of history, we are able to put history in the dock without negating it. Once again the philosopher becomes someone who asks questions. He practises a double maieutic: by putting the world to the test, he puts himself to the test (in so far as there still are any philosophers, that is to say, men who specialize in thinking about the world because they cannot fully and practically live the world of their thoughts). The Socratic philosopher reveals possibilities and impossibilities, and their relations and their routes. His irony involves an opting – taking sides, adopting positions – in favour of one possibility or another; it will always reject any stance which would leave possibilities floating, so to speak, like clouds in the sky. A possibility cannot remain a possibility for ever; the fundamental property of a possibility is a tendency towards self-realization in practice and in action. Only by opting do we supersede abstract reflection about possibilities; only by opting will we integrate judgement with practice and rationality. But – as irony has occasionally and cruelly pointed out – it is a risky process, since irony meticulously dispels the popular confusion between opting and self-
assurance (or certainty . . .), forcing us to examine the motivation behind our options, and resolving once and for all the confusion between belief and choice.

Certainly, the mind takes comfort from an idealized portrait of the universe, one to feel at home in, one to merge into. Dogmatism – that facile solution – will be with us for a long time to come. While history demonstrates that in the history of science and society only certain circumstances can ever become systems, and then only briefly, before breaking down, dogmatism believes itself to be permanently in systematizable circumstances, and always close to the definitive system. Is there a dogmatic temperament or character which seeks speculative satisfaction and fulfils itself in mental toil or in idleness? Or is it the movement of knowledge and social development which creates this tendency, while at the same time producing its opposite? Both, probably! Today, irony is attacking this tendency at its very roots. The Socratic philosopher looks for the universality beyond differences and particularities (while at the same time maintaining and exploring them). And for that very reason he refuses to accept an overall picture of the ‘world’. Today such a picture would present only inaccurate generalities, marginalizing all real as well as virtual differences and particularities, but still not attaining universality. We receive the ‘world’ as fragmented, shattered, hence differentiated. We must think these differences through. If possible, we must put the pieces back together again, but we must not force the fragments into some kind of totality. We should leave the task of explaining history to history itself, and while refuting historicism, we should consider a history of it to be indispensable. We should leave the study of the various levels of social relations to sociologists, and while refuting sociologism, we should still consider that these relations, and knowledge of them, are very important. And so on and so forth. We must never be reductive, we must never parenthesize, except provisionally. The conditions for a unitary picture are not ripe. Today programmatic thinking, which seeks to explore possibilities and to organize the particular and differentiated elements it is offered, can only envisage such a picture as impossible: beyond the horizon. To draw such a picture, we would need to have answered the questions: ‘Where are we heading? What is modernity? Where is it leading us?’

If in the future a unitary picture of the universe, a synthesis of knowledge and praxis, must become a necessity, as a requirement of dialectical reason, it is unlikely to have anything in common with the philosophical systems we are already familiar with. We do not know what categories it will employ. Will it still use the ‘categories’ of alienation and totality? Probably not even these. Perhaps it will dispense
with abstract philosophical categories, offering itself directly to world consciousness, itself integrated within a unitary praxis. . . . But until then, areas of knowledge and hypotheses will remain legitimate targets for irony, and subject to its rigours. It is reasonable for the fragmentary to be dissatisfied with its state of fragmentation, but it should never aspire to totality! Thus, until such time as they join forces with creation in a unifying and unified praxis, irony will judge all representations according to its own criterion. And as for the absence – brief or lengthy – of a living totality, irony will take up its cause. And on the shores of this new land of living, lived, life-giving totality, irony would breathe its final breath. . . .

Irony refutes all false claims to authenticity: first, the claim of power (the quintessential false mode of relations and existence) – of representations (which pretend to be alive, as sources and essences of life) – of established and institutionalized structures (like bones masquerading as organs). Where is authenticity to be found? Irony does not say that it knows; indeed, it does not know. All it knows is how to strip the inauthentic of its mask of authenticity.

Thus irony defines a subjectivity – or rather, a certain shading, a quality or tonality of what we usually call the ‘subjective’. There is nothing about this quality of consciousness which would make it appear as psychologically determined, as a purely psychic phenomenon functioning within a previously ordained and determined ‘subject’. It is irony which gives it a form, a situation, a ‘foundation’; irony places it in history. Because there is a profound historicity in everything which is human, history cannot be reduced to the representations human individuals make of it (even those most active of individuals, politicians, who think they ‘represent’ total praxis and global society, which indeed they do, but with all the shortcomings of all ‘representations’). Because the historical cannot be reduced to the level of discourse or representations, history brings something new. Hence irony, which discovers the new while revealing how uncertain and unforeseen it is.

This irony is founded on objectivity, and allows reflective – and thus subjective – thinking a certain relative independence. The latter is not and cannot be outside history, above classes, their relations and conflicts, or above social relations in general. Any claim pure or impure thinking makes to being above and outside ‘structures’ and ‘social contexts’ is illusory. However, historical circumstances and becoming penetrate structures and contexts just as they do superstructures. The latter are resistant; but becoming corrodes them and eats them away. Becoming introduces an objective irony, and ‘subjective’ irony observes it. Wedged into the situation, irony brings neither
absolute objectivity nor an ontologically privileged authenticity. It is simply more ‘profound’ and more solidly based than the structures and superstructures which historical becoming and historical circumstance are in the process of dismantling.

The irony we are talking about is therefore not a privilege of the non-aligned intellectual, or of the ‘intelligentsia’ as a group apparently disconnected from class relations. On the contrary, it is fortunate in being an aspect of reflective thinking, which is able to situate itself in historical dialectic – the dialectic of the foreseen and the unforeseen, the determined and the aleatory, the possible and the impossible – by formulating the demands and questions this dialectic makes, and by trying to get answers from whomsoever those questions implicate. One problem – or rather, one grey area: effectiveness. Those who turn their attention to established structures will be less profound, their knowledge and lucidity will be relatively circumscribed, but they will have a greater chance of being effective. The Socratic philosopher’s irony does not raise him more ‘ideally’ above the world and above history, compensating his real powerlessness with an illusory power. He knows he is weak. He knows he is strong. He thinks that his lucidity will be useful in the long term – in other words, in terms of strategies rather than tactics.

We have no hesitation in repeating that irony goes some way towards thwarting the ideologies at the centre of the ideological spasm which paradoxically underpins scepticism, ‘deideologization’ and the withering away of ideologies. It gives the coup de grâce – on the theoretical level – to false and mystified consciousness.

We are at too early a stage in our arguments to be able to state that irony alone can define modernity. We will make do with a suggestion: could modernity be the era of irony?

Of course, this apologia for irony, directed primarily as it is against traditional materialist or idealist philosophy, will itself be attacked for being philosophically idealist. But let us not confuse idealism with utopianism.

The maieutic of modernity is not without a certain utopianism. The idea that modern society could give birth to something without undergoing immense labour-pains, and the hypothesis that philosophy (or a critique of philosophy) could alleviate these pains and reduce the discrepancy between what is born and what was expected, both contain an element of utopianism. This use of utopianism must not be confused with pseudo-utopias (for example, the utopia of the just state, a benevolent power and authentic relations with power).

These propositions (in the literal sense of the term: they propose, they put forward an arguable, shaky interpretation of what has been
accomplished and of what lies ahead) allow us to formulate several of the rules of ironic discourse and ironic wisdom, as a provisional moral code:

The rule of distance. Irony distances itself in relation to the present, that overwhelming topicality which submerges so many people precisely because of their desire to be aware and always up-to-date. Irony distances itself, but in a sensible and measured way: not too near, not too far. Like wisdom of old, but not in the same way, it sets limits on the will to power. It sifts through people and events to select what matters and what does not. It challenges the important things which are important only this week or this season. Hence the rule: 'Keep well away — well in the sense of not too near, not too far — from people, situations, events, things. Choose the ones you will try to approach and the ones you will let yourself be approached by.' If you really want to understand this rule, think about distance. Man has his distance in relation to nature. Consciousness has its distance in relation to things and other consciousnesses. These distances and separations are painful, but they are also our good fortune. Like a mother giving birth to her child, nature expelled the human species. Whether by chance or by design is unimportant. Man is outside of things. This distance between man and things is designated first and foremost by the signs he uses. They are his most active, his most powerful implements, but they are nothing. Across the distance they designate things and nature, the nature which fills our dreams and to which we will never return. Yet the distance must be bridged. This is the task of words and actions, of concept and practice. Sometimes poetry succeeds, and so does music. Now that distance has been explained, and its necessity, have you fully understood this profound irony: that the dark side, the negative, creates what is most positive? However, we should not exacerbate distance to the extent of creating an abyss, for then nothing will succeed in bridging it, and consciousness will become walled up in its own isolation and abstraction. On the other hand, if distance is allowed to narrow, it will come too close to things, crushing itself against them; hiding its eyes, it too will seek isolation. So cultivate the feeling for the good distance, the balanced distance which comes from far away, beyond historical uncertainties: from the origins of consciousness. So avoid being either oversuspicious or overvulnerable. Find the path between these two failures: try to achieve patience. Have as much patience as time and consciousness, have as much as your own consciousness.'

This rule of thought and action offers some protection against being exploited or led astray. It allows for an agreement between men and the events which reveal the profound movement beneath the superficial twists and turns of history. Hence the second rule, called
the rule of option: 'Do not be intimidated by important things – men, ideas, events – or by things which are interesting and fascinating because they happen to be all the rage. Choose what to be passionate about, choose it with all the irony of your reason. But don’t let distance stop you from participating in what you have chosen.' And we should not forget that sooner or later everyone does this, but falsely, some with cynicism, others with frustrated arrogance. Hence the rule of non-judgement which forbids the ironic consciousness to assert its value: 'Make sure your irony does not think itself superior. But it should not see itself as a failure either. Just as it must find the right distance, so it must find the right tone. It must find a lightness of touch.'

Brechtian distancing was brusque and brutal, forced, overdeliberate, and lacked grace and style. It was not well judged. It was the latter-day acquisition of ugly, pedantic minds. 'Make judgements only occasionally, but do not be satisfied merely to reflect upon things. Do not be satisfied simply to throw what people say back in their faces. Participate. Learn how to speak about serious issues unaffectedly, about frivolous issues uncynically. Despise no one, but never trust anyone completely. Learn how to understand tactics and strategies. When they seem to demand secrecy and silence, learn how to expose them. Be an enemy of silence, by learning how to keep quiet.'

You must fully realize that ironic discourse is more profound – in other words, truer – than discourse devoid of irony. Do not forget Marx's little word of advice: take the most firmly established 'categories' and the most solidly based concepts cum grano salis, with a pinch of ironic salt. Why is this true? Because if your words are ironic they will give what you say stronger support; also, your facial expressions come into play. But that is not the only reason. Beware of the perils of subjectivity. Remember: irony takes distances into account, the distances between men, between men and their ideas and their actions, between the consequences of actions and the motives, reasons, practices and plans which produced them, between words and things, between ideologies and practices. Taking distances into account, irony bridges distances (almost: up to a certain point). It is better equipped than serious discourse to link what lives within and beyond language and discourse with the 'world' of language, with the discourse which aspires to totality without ever attaining it.

Again, your irony must hit the right note and strike a happy medium. Never let it deviate, never let it turn into some kind of game. Games have their own rules and their own laws, different ones. Make sure to direct it towards the contradictions which are crying out to be put into words, and which no arrangement of words and concepts can ever completely capture without robbing them of their vitality. Launch it into the void which even the fullest moments make above discourse. Launch it in quest of that astounding mixture of the
foreseen and the unforeseen which appears predictable in hindsight and which we call: events.

Do not forget that the ‘function’, the importance and the status of intellectuals have changed somewhat. Even the word itself no longer has a very precise meaning. Once they are not functionaries, ‘intellectuals’ ipso facto no longer have a function. They cease to be the pedagogues of society at large, relaying the lessons of history through education, books or the press, from one person to another. They no longer even create effective images or general representations which can answer ideological needs. Because they have become trapped by the division of compartmentalized labour, managed by politicians and technicians, and aligned with manual workers (or, if you wish, vice versa), they have been easily subordinated, conditioned, shut up in ghettos, subjected to the demands of propaganda and advertising. You must be aware of this weakness; it is your own. First you must use irony to cleanse yourself completely of the will to power, that empty sop to self-esteem. Leave others to wield power over things and, more importantly, over men. But you must realize the new strength of this weakness, the strength of negation and the negative: of radical critique. Take responsibility for the negativity operating deep beneath the surface. Build your irony on it. One last word, although it has already been said: don’t bother to be always on your guard against being duped. For you always will be duped, if only by your own mistrust, or by your own feelings. For there can be no question of not having feelings, can there? Any more than there can be a question of ceasing to choose, and to act. And this is where the highest and the deepest irony begins.
Among the youths brought up in Corinth in the house of King Polybus, Oedipus stood out not only for his splendid strength and beauty, but also for his mind. But there was an untamed side to his character which people found perplexing, and which was in marked contrast to his intelligence; even in those distant times, the Greeks had the idea that only barbarians could be brutal. In King Polybus’s household young Oedipus’s character was explained by the discomfort of his feet, which became painful and swollen if he walked even the shortest distances. No one understood that this mistrustful, moody, disturbed adolescent suspected that there was something mysterious about himself. The local maidens and women were fond of Oedipus, and took every opportunity of telling him: ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of, neither destiny nor the future. Life is short, and youth and beauty even more so. Take life as it comes, make the most of what it has to offer, that’s the best we poor mortals can do. Be wise, and leave the talking to old men, gods and oracles…. ’ But to no avail. They were unable to alleviate his depressive moods. Oedipus avoided the company of these women and girls.

When the drunken guest insulted him at the end of the banquet, crudely calling him a ‘fake’ [πλάστος] in front of the entire royal family and the city dignitaries, Oedipus remained quite calm. Truth to tell, his aggressive attitude and the biting remarks he had made about this rather too dignified and haughty stranger had encouraged the quarrel. He got to his feet and left the room, but not before saying: ‘I’ve known for a long time that I don’t belong…. Even before I was born, I didn’t belong. It would have been better if I had never been born.’ After the guest had left, and despite kind words from Polybus and Merope, whom he still thought were his real parents, he insisted that he regretted not having killed him on the spot, regardless of the laws of hospitality. From that day forth, he was racked with a heart-rending certainty and uncertainty. What could the insult have meant? The stranger had seemed important, and had remained level-headed
in spite of all the wine—what were his reasons for using such a word? The earth of his native land burned beneath his agonized feet. Limping like an old man, he went into the mountains, among wild animals, faint with hunger amid game he was unable to catch. Over and over again he asked himself the same question: ‘Who am I? And why am I here? Why am I different from my brothers, who accept the good things that life has to offer, and who never seem to worry?’ Finally he decided to consult the oracle. The Sun-God in person would tell him that he did belong with his family and in his city, on his native soil.

Through the mouth of She Who Speaks, the Sun-God told him that not only was he different and out of place among his brothers and friends, like a beast of the forest, a ghost, but that he would also become a monster among men, the scum of the earth, the city and the world. No less enigmatically, the oracle added that this strange destiny would secure him immortal glory. Appalled, Oedipus fled into the mountains. He would have liked to stay there for ever, living off berries, gorging himself on the bleeding flesh of creatures like himself, sleeping on the bare ground. Above all, sleeping.

It was not at a crossroads, but at a commonplace fork in the road that Oedipus first saw Laius and his retinue. The fact that Laius was fleeing from his town has since been forgotten. Indifferent to the pain in his feet, Oedipus forged ahead like a young bull; but the path was just wide enough for two, and there was certainly no room for an entire royal procession and someone coming in the opposite direction. When the herald preceding the King’s chariot pushed him from the path, Oedipus was overcome with an uncontrollable rage. ‘So I run away into the woods and even here I’m brutally reminded that I don’t belong, me and only me, in those fine cities where the happy medium rules, and every round peg has its hole. . . . I’ll teach them!’ Blind with anger, he killed the guide with one blow to the face, like a pugilist; he threw himself on Laius’s servants, and killed them with the herald’s staff, while the venerable old man himself stood up in his chariot and tried to defend himself with a ludicrously feeble twitch of his whip. This was the last straw for Oedipus; he seized Laius by the beard and dragged him down into the dust, trampling him underfoot and finishing him off with his own stick. When he had slaughtered the five men and their master, he looked with scorn at the possible booty, the horses, the fine garments and weapons. He left the scene with a feeling of relief. Yes, he did belong, because he had just carried out the most manly of all actions, the action of heroes and gods: he had killed. Yes, he did belong: five men dead, and he had a place in the world and space on the path ahead. The oracle’s words had been
fulfilled: for the sake of one blow he had left six corpses behind, one of whom had been a powerful and majestic figure, lying on the ground hideously crushed, the dust slaked with their blood. He was a monster. But who would ever know? Only Oedipus himself.

Relieved, his despair forgotten, he came down from the mountains towards the city below: Thebes. He arrived there at daybreak. When she saw him, the Sphinx was delighted. What a beautiful victim for the cruel virgin this youth was! Yet she was surprised to see that he was alone, without baggage, a simple stick his only possession, so that he would have nothing to lay down before her, nothing to be fearful for other than himself, nothing to distract him from thinking about the riddle. She circled slowly down and, gripping firmly with her claws, came to rest on a rock.

Perfectly calm, Oedipus approached the fearful siren, whose shrill screams made the Theban nights hideous, who claimed to be the sister of that other virgin, the maid of Athens, the crepuscular owl-goddess, and who would wake up the people of Thebes before dawn, angry that they should be asleep and eager to be made their queen. What man other than Oedipus could have come within the shadow of those vast wings, so close to those enormous talons, without being terror-struck? What other youth could have looked upon those heaving breasts, those perfect breasts, those Sphinx-eyes, sparkling and sombre, those strangely piercing, star-studded eyes, and remain so calm? 'I do belong, I am a monster. I do belong. I am a monster. . . .' Oedipus repeated joyfully to himself, Oedipus who had just killed six men, one of them a king. He was not afraid.

The Sphinx commanded him to halt. Raising her menacing claw towards him, she said: 'Young man, like the other travellers I condescend to speak to, you may not enter the town until you have answered my question. Do not worry, I will not ask you about your parents or your ancestry, or your past, or what good or bad deeds you have done, or the reasons for your visit here. For that I care nothing. I find you insignificant, but what must be, must be! I ask you the same question I ask everyone, the same simple question. I'm sure you will know the answer, because it really is easy, but I advise you to be quick about it. Just one thing: as soon as you give the answer, you will be allowed into the town, and the cowardly sentinels you can see below will greet you with open arms. . . .' And, strange and rhythmic, her spellbinding voice descanting as in some sacred ritual, the Sphinx intoned the famous riddle: 'What being, with only one voice, has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and is weakest when it has most?'

At first Oedipus responded with a question of his own: 'Oh Sphinx,
you who bar the gates of this city, to the misfortune of its citizens and
of travellers and strangers, by what right do you stop me? In the name
of what law, human or divine? What do you seek?' Taken aback by his
audacity, the Sphinx blushed like a young girl, closed her star-studded
eyes and replied: ‘I seek nothing. I know.’ ‘I am going to kill you,’ said
Oedipus calmly. ‘Just try,’ replied the Sphinx, ‘and I will rip you apart
with these claws of mine. You would be better off playing the game.’
‘What is the game?’ asked the youth, ‘and what are the stakes?’ ‘You
and I,’ replied the she-monster. ‘If I know who you are, but you do not
know who I am, then you are in my power. Power is knowledge. If the
reverse is true, then I must obey you and you can do with me what you
will. This is destined, by order of the Sun, the oracle of the stars, the
word uttered by the mouth of darkness at the centre of the world....’

‘You are risking a great deal,’ was Oedipus’s calm reply.

‘Less than you,’ answered the Sphinx, and she sang the fatal riddle
again, her voice slow and rhythmic.

Oedipus scarcely hesitated. In a flash he saw himself as a child
again, crawling on all fours in the shadow of a lime tree, among the
shepherds and their flocks; he saw the old man from whose trembling
hand he had so easily snatched the stick he was still holding; he saw
himself as a man, strong and sturdy, facing the winged virgin –
‘Sphinx, I know the being which has sometimes four feet, sometimes
two, sometimes three: it is man. It is I. And man is that, and is not that,
oh cruel one. Your riddle shows man as you see him, according to
your own nature, triple-natured man, more beast than man, with the
paws of a beast. Your riddle gives you away, oh winged virgin, girl-god­
dess with the claws of a wild animal. Now I know who you are, and you
are mine.’

While he spoke, Oedipus stared at the Sphinx. Beneath his gaze
she began to waste away, consumed by an inner fire which blazed in
her enormous eyes, vast as the cosmos, swarming with comets, planets
and stars. She was barely able to pronounce, as in a sigh, these last,
almost unintelligible words: ‘You have beaten me, Oedipus, but
beware, my child, beware. You have killed me, and you are me, and I
was the Word....’ Suddenly all that remained of her was a handful of
ashes at his feet. Ignoring them, just as he had ignored the wild words
of love the dying virgin had uttered, he set off again, forging onwards
like a young bull.

As he entered his native town (but without knowing it) he was
greeted by the cheering citizens who had flocked to the battlements
and into the streets. He was the hero. Thus he accomplished (without
knowing it) what is forbidden among men, and what only gods and
beasts do. Jocasta was still beautiful; she had no longer expected to
have an ardent and virginal adolescent for a bed-mate. She treated him royally. She made love expertly, she was mature and tender. Together they reached the heights of pleasure and happiness. It was a strange passion. Once he had been made king, Oedipus still worked in the fields, talking to shepherd slaves and to the free peasants who depended on the city; he remembered the lowly keeper of the flock who had cared for his misshapen feet when he was a child. Sometimes he would till the land, and he is said to have invented an advanced form of plough, although this is probably just a legend, and a relatively recent one at that.

When at last, by some fatal chance, he finally learned the truth, his own secret, locked within himself, the secret he had always yearned to know, Oedipus had become a man, a king, a hero. He felt intoxicated, overwhelmed by a strange and sudden joy. Leaving the palace, he sat down at the roadside and spoke to the travellers who were making their way towards the sacred gates, unaware of what had happened. He asked them questions such as: ‘What is the name of the shadow which lives in the light? And the light which lives in the shadow? Who dies at birth and is born at death? What is the name of he who wants to enter his house and leave it at the same time?’ and others even more bizarre. People were perplexed. ‘The town crier has just blown his horn, the market has just started, and we have important business in town. Why are you asking us these childish riddles?’ Oedipus replied: ‘I know who you are, but if you do not know who I am you will fall under my power, the power of the Word, and I will be more than king, I will become a god without ceasing to be a man and a beast. . . .’ Lost for words, the people gathered round their king. Then someone appeared who was not young, or handsome, or important: a sly, crafty peasant. Scarcely stopping to think he said: ‘But Oedipus, the answer is man, it always was and it always will be. And man is what you say he is, and he is not what you say he is. . . .’

Suddenly Oedipus realized that he had become the Sphinx, that he had always been the Sphinx, an enigma among men and among beasts, a monstrous riddle rather than the one by whom the riddle would be answered. He let out a great cry of anger and despair. He was dazzled by an unbearable light. He cried: ‘I have condemned myself! I have pronounced my own damnation! I am king, and I have given you all the order for my own punishment. . . . Because I was unable to choose between beast and god, I am condemned to darkness and silence!’ And with his nails he scratched deep furrows in his face, and tore out his eyes. ‘Who will tell me who I am now,’ he groaned, ‘and say what there is in me that does not belong, what emptiness, what absence? . . .’
And turning his back on the palace, where Jocasta had already hanged herself from the main beam in the wedding chamber, Oedipus started feeling his way from tree to tree, at the beginning of his never-ending wanderings.

*Oedipus’s soliloquy on the road to Colonus*

‘But is any of that important? Where was the harm? Why shouldn’t fathers sleep with their daughters, sisters with their brothers and sons with their mothers, if they want to? Does nature forbid it? No. Haven’t the gods done it many a time? They certainly have, and what authority is higher than the gods? And anyway, what have the gods said about all this? Nothing. Since the winged virgin died, the gods have been silent. . . . The most extraordinary thing is that it wasn’t deliberate. I am innocence personified, I, Oedipus. If I can be blamed for anything, it’s for being impulsive. Yes, it’s true, I admit, five or six respectable characters got in my way; I eliminated them, I murdered Dad and screwed Mum. OK! That at least didn’t harm anyone, and it was thoroughly enjoyable. Of course, such actions can’t be raised to the level of a general rule. Well, that’s that. When it all happened we were both out of our minds, Jocasta and I. It was like some fatal intoxication. With a little bit of political manoeuvring we were able to send the unfavourable soothsayers and the conspirators into exile—or to somewhere even better. Because in the end, if it is really forbidden, then I didn’t know; and if it is allowed, even just in exceptional circumstances, then I have nothing to be ashamed of. I disregarded a couple of old, upper-class habits; I violated a couple of the conventions of human societies. So what. Does it matter? A fuss about nothing. To quote that great French philosopher of two thousand years hence, Sapper Camember, once the bounds are breached, there are no limits. Whatever made me scratch my eyes out? Nothing will cure that. My mother was my wife, and I loved her dearly—whatever made her hang herself? Well, perhaps I wanted to get myself talked about in the centuries to come. Without that gesture there would have been no drama, no sealed fate! But no, that wasn’t all; at that awful moment I felt the earth shake beneath my feet; above my head the sky opened wide; chaos gaped before me, unknown monsters were about to swarm forth from the entrails of the cosmos. I had to. . . . Ah, those terrible words, with their follow-up, the terrifying ‘I must do what I must do’, the bitter ‘I have to . . .’, the ghastly ‘I ought to have . . .’, ‘I had to . . .’. Why did the cruel, hypnotic voice make itself heard above the town? Why did the Sphinx ask the riddle of life and death? She had to. Sphinx, Sphinx, you offered no choice. It
had to be thus! Order must be restored, any order. Without order, it's all a shambles, a carve-up, one almighty cockup. Without destiny, without a struggle with destiny, without chance and a struggle against chance, there is nothing but dust beneath our bleeding feet. We are children gathering the sand of life in our hands and trying to give it a shape. But no, that's not quite it. Ah, I've got it! Could I be the wanderer, the man of the eternal riddle? Errant and erring, could my only truth be to wander? Could I have punished myself for becoming fixed and for attempting to attain being and permanence? Perhaps I should have become what I was and yet was not, like some luminous shadow: the Word . . . the Sphinx . . . consciousness! Having left nature my mother, thrice, thrice have I killed nature my mother, losing everything, even the sight she gave me. So that I might see. To see wandering, mine, everyone's. Yes, I do belong. Men would miss me if I ceased to exist, and I shall obsess them until the end of time, a symbol of man and of mankind.'

The voice of the Unseeable accompanies Oedipus like a faithful wife: ‘Oedipus! Oedipus! No! No! That’s not it! You haven’t understood a thing, Oedipus! You’re forgetting the essential. You became a hero and a demigod through murder and incest, Oedipus. You became king, uniting the father and the law within yourself. You took power, you kept power by exploiting the riddle and the Word, and that’s what you should have punished yourself for, because you, the first and the last of men, failed in your quest. Did you not already hold the highest power of all? . . .’

The voice is lost in the tumult. A cloud of dust rises from beneath the feet of soldiers marching by. They laugh at the blind old man. They come from the little town towards which Oedipus is groping his stumbling way. Athens.
If I had plenty of time at my disposal and enough energy to bring the history of philosophy up to date and start paving the way for the investigative practice which will one day replace philosophy, I would return to a former project of mine which I have already outlined somewhere or other: I would write a vast, serious and well-documented opus several volumes long, entitled *The Metamorphoses of the Devil*. I would consult treatises on demonology, occultism, witchcraft; I would read arcane tomes on cabalistic magic, and pore over the spiritual testaments of heretics; I would make sure not to overlook the most celebrated works of philosophy, literature, painting and music ancient and modern. A chapter would be devoted to the evil spirit Descartes instructed to perform that most disturbing of tasks, the unleashing of hyperbolic doubt; with this evil spirit, the demonic becomes rationalized, and its dark powers lose some of their fascination in the process; perhaps this is Descartes’s way of introducing the idea of negativity— but we should be wary of oversimplified analogies.¹

As part of this project, I would revisit Venice to study Tintoretto. How handsome the seducer is in *The Temptation of Christ*, burning with passion, desire, sensuality, and so ambiguous, so mysteriously feminine! One would have to be a Jesus to resist him. Then, together with the history of painting and philosophy, I would need to look at the history of music again, and particularly at the *diabolus in musica*. This was sometimes a specific figure (such as the savage Triton), sometimes a more diffuse presence. What is the significance of the devil’s violin, from Tartini to the Kreisler of Hoffmann (and Schumann)? Why did the violin embody the demonic principle, as opposed to the harmony of the keyboard? How is it that Vivaldi and Bach thought they could use the respective means at their disposal to exorcize this dark power, by uniting human inventiveness and divine harmony, while Mozart, and later Schumann, were to attempt the even stranger marriage of heaven and hell?²

Stendhal made great fun of demonic poetry: Lamartine’s *La Chute*
d'un ange, and Eloa, by that great poet and undercover cop Count Alfred de Vigny. Despite the derision, the devil stayed on. Balzac found room for him; he has the role of honour in *The Wild Ass’s Skin*. And is not Vautrin an incarnation of the devil? Is he not an enigmatic version of Mephistopheles? In Balzac, the devil becomes lord of a demesne: the slums of the city, the underbelly of society, the underworld of crime. In Baudelaire he extends his fiefdom to the borders of poetry. I find the theme of the devil again in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and in Valéry’s *Faust*, but best of all I find it in Thomas Mann’s *Dr Faustus*, where the demonic function is once again assumed by music. In *Remembrance of Things Past* French clarity meticulously demotes the demonic principle to the realm of sexuality, where it plays as active a role as it does in Bernanos’s *Sous le soleil de Satan*.

The good, decent, loyal materialists who liquidated Lucifer along with the Lord ended up producing – oh irony! – a completely dualistic representation of the world: the good guys and the bad guys, us and them, positive and negative heroes. In their own particular way they have perpetuated the demonic–divine dialectic, the dialectic of good and evil, of darkness and light; but it was so infantile (yet lacking the grace of childhood) and so minimally dialectical that someone must have advised them to mix a little white with the black and a little black with the white, and the result is a yawningly tedious grisaille whose monotony is relieved only when decent folk are stirred from their dogmatic stupor by some new bee in their collective bonnet (such as Titoism, or revisionism).

As one would expect of an evil spirit, the devil’s metamorphoses are prodigiously varied and unpredictable. His history is much livelier than the history of God or the history of being, so dear to philosophers. In the eighteenth century the devil still haunted the towns of France; he would scornfully lift the roofs of houses to reveal the dreary goings-on of their residents; he would take the shape – copying God – of an attractive girl because he had fallen in love with a handsome army officer, because he had a yen to go to low drinking dens, and to visit Italy incognito. Next we see him hiding away among the flocks, at a time when shepherds and shepherdesses had become the official emblem of innocence and fidelity, of nature and its virtues. At the very moment when Marie Antoinette’s pathetic pastoral pastiches were attaining the status of an illusory Paradise Lost, our dear Restif de la Bretonne informs us that Satan has gone into (temporary) exile in the remoteness of the French countryside, among that most insignificant of peasantry: shepherds. I would have to include a chapter on demonic initiation in Restif’s works. And the theme of yet another chapter: the Marquis de Sade – did he think he was the
reincarnation of the Prince of Darkness? Was he intent on master-minding an offensive of the forces of pure demonism to recapture the towns? Back home in his native Luberon, did he possess a copy of the mysterious *Livre des Bergers* Restif had known of? (Another idea springs to mind: who believes in Lucifer but not in the Lord? Jean-Paul Sartre. Who believes in the Lord but not in Lucifer? François Mauriac.)

It goes without saying that this history of the devil would be Marxist — in other words, dialectical and materialist. It would require its author to accumulate and ‘thematize’ a vast corpus of human facts and representations, grasping their links with praxis as well as their ideological functions. The devil alters significantly according to eras, events, classes and class conflicts, peoples and states. His history would uncover the underside of official histories, and much more besides. Right up to the present day, every era, every people, every class — and every group, every political party — has had its devil, has seen it, conjured it up, made it, lived it, pursued it and immolated it, only to resuscitate it in order to kill it anew. And as people are always against before being for anything (and to a greater and more effective extent more against than for), this pursuit of the real and imaginary monster has always been of the utmost importance.

When and where did the devil begin? At the beginning.

As cultures are born they give names to things, places and men, and go on to dramatize the image of nature, using it for often obscure ends. In fact, when a society begins, there can be no question of class interests, or even of ideology in the precise sense of the term. Myths, symbols and images come before concepts and ideologies. Slowly, concepts derive from images. At first they are indistinguishable from them; then, through a slow process of refinement, they develop as distinct entities. The Book of Genesis begins with an unconditional (moral and ontological) apologia for human incuriosity, and the astonishment which is the first step towards knowledge, the quest for knowledge, and the link between orgasm and knowledge are all attributed to the Prince of Evil. God forbids the fruits of the tree of knowledge and pleasure; as for the devil, he urges Eve to pluck the apple of sin. A consummate reactionary, the Judaeo-Christian God pronounces against Eve and for his idiotic angels, for Abel the shepherd and against Cain the craftsman and master of fire. The myth anathematizes whoever dares lift the veil of appearances and attack the little trickeries of innocence and virginity. As a direct consequence, pleasure is given the titillation of being sinful, an advantage it will lose as soon as the myth starts to fade. By relegating knowledge to the margins of a life which has been regularized and a society which has been standardized, making it synonymous with witchcraft and pacts.
with the devil, this myth had far-reaching implications. How could it ever have been accepted? Because there is something terrible about knowledge, because no one knows what lies beyond the veil, because the pursuit of pleasure involves risks, because fear reigns supreme and human beings believe they do not ‘belong’, as indeed they do not. Traditional Christianity excludes from the canon of virtues the qualities which make human beings human, and relegates them to the category of crimes; to reinstate them will thus require demonic heroism. This traditional Christianity overlooks the fact that sloth was a prime cause of human inventiveness, that greed led to accumulation and that lust was a contributing factor to the pleasure of living.

Far more profoundly, the Greeks identified the powers of darkness with the Titans, one of whom stole fire from the sun. History begins with a crime: Prometheus stealing time from eternity and consciousness from the gods, as indifferent and distant as the heart of nature itself. No creation, no invention without a sin against what was and what wants only to be, world without end. Every step forward is a sin: Oedipus, Socrates, Ulysses. Myths speak of power, and justify it. Only with the myth of the devil is power challenged.

Ulysses’ inquisitiveness brings its reward: journey’s end, the happy return to native shores, to the open arms of son and faithful wife – yes, faithful, while he, Ulysses, has enjoyed so many women. Christianity will punish him: in Dante’s poem he sets out on his final journey beyond the rim of the world and down into the very depths of hell, side by side with his godfather Lucifer, the fallen shepherd of light. Thus Christianity lost one of the most brilliant ideas of Ancient Greece: the daemon is no longer divine inspiration, the soul’s breath; it is the self, the fallen and forsaken individual, the principle of individualization, conscience and defilement. Socrates’ daemon and god were combined within himself. With Christianity, the impersonal spirit becomes individualized, but the individual is cursed. By way of contradiction, Christianity promotes the individual (or promises promotion) and condemns him; it promises eternity for the individual soul and then casts it down in darkness and dereliction precisely because of its individuality; it personalizes being and then absorbs personal being into impersonal ontology and moral conformism. It diabolizes the individual, thrice-libidinous: the libido of knowledge, of pleasure, of control. What would the iconography and study of the countless last judgements and scenes of demonic torture reveal if they were interpreted in this way? . . .

At this point I would like to introduce the only place in the world I know at all well, and the contribution its own very particular history would make to the general history of the devil. How did my great
Albigensian ancestors see the powers of evil? Was their policy of seeing the worst side of things an extreme reading of Christianity, and was it intended to resolve its fundamental contradictions? Their starting point was a precise theoretical tradition: Manichaeism; they had a social base: the peasant community, compared to which feudalism – above all in and through the Church – and real history seemed the end-products of damnation. More demanding than orthodox Christianity – and more dehumanized – Albigensianism uprooted the *principium individuationis*. It was perfectly logical, perfectly coherent, the perfect theory of a perfect ontology. It challenged official Christianity by showing it its consequences and by refusing the compromises which were essential for the Church to function as a social form. Official Christianity understood the challenge, and made it clear in no uncertain terms that it had understood it.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the western Pyrenees, the Inquisition was still fully operational, although elsewhere it was in decline. Henri IV had just died. In every village the inquisitors discovered young girls and women who had relations with the devil. Needless to say, they confessed, for these so-called witches really did frequent the forests, glades and grottoes where the Virgin Mary had not yet set up lares and penates. The Inquisition incriminated (Protestant) heretics, who also held secret meetings. The job did not take long. There was nothing half-hearted about the way the Inquisitor General, Monsieur de Lancre, set about it. In this way the state and the ideological unity of the nation were both imposed upon a marginal, slightly deviant and rebellious region. It took only a few years to eradicate heresy completely, together with the paganism which still thrived among the spontaneous, naive and vigorous peasantry. By 1620 Louis XIII was able to visit the area, leading his slow, solemn retinue through a reconquered countryside, reconsecrating desecrated churches. As if to prove that the monarchy had failed to keep its most solemn promises – to maintain freedoms and franchises – the king dedicated this land to the Virgin. This won him great glory, and the title of Most Catholic. The collaboration between state and Church had been most effective; they had laid down the principle of justice and legal judgement whereby ‘the devil is other people’. The demon is whoever I designate as such, and I shall persecute him, torture him, exterminate him, burn him; and here is your proof: he burns, therefore he is the devil.

All this took place between 1610 and 1620. It was not without its consequences, nor its backlash. While Louis XIII was meandering majestically from town to town, two men met in nearby Bayonne: Jansenius and Saint Cyran. . .
You are probably shrugging your shoulders. Here we go again – more regionalism, more rusticity! But no, despite what you think, I do not suffer from tunnel vision. There is a point to all this. It is true that I am firmly in favour of anything that differentiates and particularizes history and sociology. Having said that, these things interest me because they have allowed me to study the origins (sorry, some of the origins) of a technique: amalgamation. There can be no devil without a false devil amalgamated with the (supposedly) real one. Terror is unleashed on a community. What is being targeted? The unspoken. Witch-hunts always amalgamate false witches with reputedly real ones. With the advent of the state comes the devil as politician, and amalgamation. Our beloved France is a country as singular as it is venerable. In the United States, the witches of Salem are a picturesque feature of folklore and literature. Excellent! But in France, the violence with which rural areas were Christianized and the way local particularities were destroyed are deliberately clothed in silence. They are regarded as localized episodes. No one has tried to write a comprehensive history of them. Burnings at the stake, diabolic rituals, witch-trials, amalgamations – the state has absorbed and digested them all. These and a few other matters give a clear idea of the results which can be obtained when force and justice unite (and by justice I mean the use of ideology as a means of justification, thus the opposite of true justice, if indeed justice can ever be true and truth just). All that matters are results, successful results. Historians follow history; they ratify it. The devil is always in the wrong; that is what he was invented for. How can we do without him? He is a part of social and political practice. When we know his real history, no matter how minimally, we will also know that there is some merit in not paying homage to Stalin, and in refusing to kneel before princes.

The history of the devil would take us further – in other words, nearer to the twentieth century and our own lives. How is it that the figure of Faust is still meaningful, and that the duo Faust–Mephistopheles still haunts us? Goethe set Part One of his tragedy amid the paraphernalia of alchemy in the heart of the kind of medieval city he could still observe around him in the backward Germany of the eighteenth century. Yet we are able to understand each feature and grasp every allusion. And similarly – or even better – in Part Two, with the phenomenology (in the Hegelian sense) of history surrounding the symbolic figure of Faust, the medium of lucidity...

Faust expects knowledge to do the impossible: to conquer time instead of knowing it and accepting it for what it is, to give him back his lost youth. Because human science cannot make the past repeat
itself, Faust abandons it and signs a pact with someone who represents the highest power of all, although he is not all-powerful and all-knowing. The devil fulfils the promise of knowledge: the totality of life and consciousness, of nature and mind, power and spontaneity, youth and wisdom, and also of pleasure and intellectual clarity, poetry and innocence. At first knowledge asserts that this totality is possible, then that it is impossible. Knowledge wants a closed circle, a repetition of what no longer exists; it is founded on this repetition, and refutes it.

Is getting the devil involved again – the devil who tempted Eve with the fruit of the tree of knowledge – the only way these promises are to be accomplished? Does Mephistopheles’ intervention merely tell us that the promised totality is entirely unthinkable? And again, what is knowledge worth if it cannot give us back our youth, if it masters only numbers and stones, not life, nor time? Will the great demonic promise to make man godlike be realized the day knowledge triumphs over time, when time goes into reverse, when we have our youth in front of us again? Will the day ever dawn when the divine is accomplished, when divinity dies because it has been fulfilled? Is it the work of some great illusionist, deceiving us with a great mirage, illusion of illusions, fiction of fictions? Could God and the devil be one and the same, the one and the other together in One?

If the devil were a mere vulgar superstition, Goethe’s Faust would be just a farce, a vulgar pantomime. As would The Wild Ass’s Skin, another masterpiece of the great demonic cycle. But what does this obsessive image mean? Alienation? Disalienation? Or both, one by means of the other? Or what? What possibility or what impossibility?

Before replying, let us consult the great initiatory book of the twentieth century, Zazie dans le métro. It teaches that God is dead, but the devil is still very much alive. But which character is the devil? Who makes the virginal little clairvoyant want to visit dens of iniquity? Who entices the poor little soul deep down into the underground (from which she emerges unscathed)? Could it be that dodgy go-between the Angel Gabriel, alias a craftily disguised Prince of Evil? Could it be the even dodgier Marceline, a woman in name and appearance only? Or the cop who sticks his nose into everything? These interpretations are vitiated by their own oversimplification. Cops, the devil . . . it’s just too easy!

It is nevertheless remarkable that the two most important establishment theologians of our time, Raymond Queneau and Jean Eiffel, appear to see eye to eye on one major point. Apparently God is dead, but the devil is still alive. The premiss is a touch shaky, but it does permit us to make a little foray into science fiction.

Capable of going faster than the speed of electromagnetic waves by
capturing photonic energy and passing into the hyperspatial continuum, the intergalactic spaceship Teilhard de Chardin broke the light barrier at instant $T$. The bang echoed through all the machinery of the solar system. The Teilhard reached point Omega in the galaxy of the same name. It was in for a few surprises. (I forgot to mention that the ship had set off from the federal capital of the Union of Communist Republics, which surrounds the capitalist world from Dunkirk to Tamanrasset.) It circled for some time around a very large planet which had intrigued the on-board observers ever since entry into Omega had been effected by the reconstitution of molecules and particles, and subsequent re-entry into the spatiotemporal discontinuum. The ethnographers in the expedition made a cautious examination of the forms of life on this enormous planet. At first they experienced a stupefaction which lasted so long that it would be beyond the means of terrestrial language to measure its duration, but in the end they understood. 

On this planet, in this galaxy, God has been a success. He exists there, he lives there. This planet hasn’t flunked it, like heaps of others where God was born and then died, for reasons as yet not clearly understood. On Omega, the CDA (Centre for Divine Action) functions perfectly, because God is in charge; he hasn’t delegated responsibility to bureaucrats. He eschews the old-man-with-a-beard image. The God of Omega hates paternalism. When he feels like it he adopts the shape of a good-looking youngster, and never gets older than our own poor unhappy Jesus (the prototype of the unsuccessful god) was when he decided it was time to die. On Omega, God is not omnipotent, because in the infinite universe omnipotence would be nonsensical; he is not all-knowing; he is simply very powerful and very knowledgeable. His place is smack in the middle of the infinite and the finite, between the universe and consciousness. When he feels the charms of youth fading away, he reincarnates into another body which then becomes the same again by effective transubstantiation. Needless to say, all the women are in love with him, as they are on earth, but in a nicer way, without being too pious about it. For yes, there are men and women on this world, but every time a satellite – the planet’s number 1 moon – passes by, everyone changes sex. Thus God is alternately masculine and feminine, according to the phases of the Omegan year. And everyone, man and woman alike, falls for this beautiful being, and they all adore the Trinity. On Omega, original sin did take place, but its consequences were not irreversible, because God accepted responsibility. Needless to say, God is involved in politics, but this is where the differences between this distant world and our own planet become fully apparent. On Omega, God is a revolutionary
and the devil is a reactionary! God is jolly and the devil is gloomy. In the distant past, when the masses rose up to demand immortality for the individual, God led them against the aristocrats, landowners, capitalists, priests, official bureaucrats, men of state and other such hellhounds; their basic claim was won during a bitter class conflict headed by God and his Marxist–Leninist party (to use terrestrial terminology). His was the honour and the duty of organizing immortality. Which wasn’t without its problems, given the demographic upward curve. According to our ethnographers, it would appear that immortality was never completely achieved on Omega, a planet where ‘almost’ is the watchword. Keeping individuals immortal requires enormous resources. For a long time these requirements could not be met. God set up a competitive examination on the results of which immortals could be selected, but it fell through; the results were fixed, and Party members kept all the available immortality for themselves; they became permanent members, and under the pressure of bureaucracy, divine action began to ossify. Then the immortals began to get bored; the devil put his oar in and almost got a law passed making death free, secular and compulsory again. Until such time as enough resources could be found to satisfy the qualitatively rising needs of the quantitatively growing population and make immortality generally available, immortals were herded together on a single continent. Then a terrible war between immortals and mortals broke out. The devil led the imperialist forces of immortality. Much against his will, God had to put together a scratch army, a police force, a state, a church. These were heady days for the devil. Victory was his – almost. But in his infinite cleverness, God managed to conduct the withering away of the state like the virtuoso he was, instituting Communism for the immortals – in other words, for all citizens. Solar ethnographers have described astonishing ceremonies which were also theatrical performances commemorating a great historical event: the suicide of the devil. Surrounded by his cronies, the demon challenges God to a duel: God appears in all his youthful splendour, and the old devil kills himself. To put it in a nutshell: God had a lot of problems (on every front: ideological, economic, political), but in the end he managed to resolve and overcome them. His biography (which we vulgarly call history) is about to come out in solar- and terrestrial-language versions. . . .
FOURTH PRELUDE

On the Theme of the New Life

There is something we call a ‘modern myth’ which sees part of reality as an image of what is possible and what is not possible, sometimes illuminating it, sometimes hiding it from our eyes: it is the myth of the new life. There is something we call an ‘ideology’, a representation which combines illusion and knowledge and gives certain human groups the means to control their own lives, to suggest a solution to their problems and to impose that solution on other groups by force: it is the ideology of the new life. There is something we call a ‘utopian’ image of the future which allows us to separate ourselves from what has been accomplished in order to judge and make a critique of the present, sometimes in terms of failure and the inability to act – sometimes in terms of an emotional urge for action: it is the image of a utopia. Finally, there is something we call an ‘idea’ which projects the self beyond the self in a plan or fiction by which aspirations and desires express themselves: it is the idea of another life (on this earth).

Whether it was a myth, an ideology, a utopia, an image, or just simply an idea and a great hope, the new life had a strength which we can begin to measure only now that it has become exhausted (although it may still come springing back in a variety of unpredictable guises). Like its devil and its god, every era has had this most precious of gifts: the image of the new life, long-awaited, desired, ‘possible’. The new life was something one could die for, and consequently kill for; something which could justify one’s actions and their ramifications. It destroyed the barrier between the other life and a life of otherness, the other world and a world of otherness. The more or less radical critique of what already exists and the more or less profound rejection of established, prejudged order made it a requirement, and depended upon it. Any day now we would be entering the new life. This life was already there, close at hand, possible, almost a presence, but smothered, sidelined, absent, yet ever-ready for the moment when it would be released into the open. Therefore this new life which was about to spring forth from the world of appearances was itself new in
INTRODUCTION TO MODERNITY

appearance only. It was absolute, eternal, thus beyond temporality: as old as it was new. Therefore it meant repetition, rebirth, the return to the lost life, the restoration of being, resurrection. In one unique, absolute, pure, spontaneous, integrated moment, men and things would be changed – not superficially and apparently, but substantially. Perhaps every event and every decision in history has been underpinned by this expectation of the absolute event which would consecrate history by bringing it to an end. What was to be blamed for the new life being delayed, what baneful powers opposed its advent? This or that: the devil, evil and disease, religion, morality, the city and its febrile way of life, unnatural social conventions and culture, the division of labour, worthless work and fruitless fatigue, the bourgeoisie and its traditions and prejudices (particularly the moral and sexual ones). But, ever at the ready, \textit{physis} would one day displace \textit{antiphysis}. If the latter was synonymous with mendacity, error, appearance and illusions, \textit{physis} was truth, profundity, sincerity, the substantially real, spontaneity, nature, beauty. A barrier between us, our own selves and our own truth was about to fall: our own life, hitherto denied us, would at last be recognized, reconstituted, restored or resuscitated.

So, in the thirteenth century, Joachim de Fiore proclaimed the new life through the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. The incarnation of the Second Person, Christ, had not been enough to save the world. The Holy Ghost made flesh would continue the crusade, ending with an assault on the castles and the monasteries, imposing justice and peace on the world. This message provoked a peasant uprising. The world of the lords – the lords of heaven and earth – was neither good nor permanent. The world of the priests had not been saved. The Church told lies, even to itself. This was a prophecy which proclaimed the end of time – in other words, the end of history, with all its violence and mendacity.

Very often the new life took a derisory turn: return to the earth and to nature (a characteristic obsession of intellectuals), self-perpetuating little groups and communities, facile and romantic plans for the wholesale elimination of the capital and assets of the urban bourgeoisie, etc. But we should note that such reactionary tendencies are the reverse image which must inevitably accompany any effective and subversive critique. Critique by the Left tends to spawn right-wing criticism. Still, only the image of the new life could (and still can) provide the distance necessary for understanding, judgement and criticism.

We all know that Rousseau gave us a certain naive and profound image of the new life – the return to the earth, to communion and
community, to spontaneity and nature. Eventually the contradictions within this image became apparent and its more nostalgic elements began to take over, but until that happened it was surely of immense and revolutionary significance. Some of the themes developed by Rousseau (nature and idea, spontaneity and creation, the cosmological and the anthropological) became fused in a grandiose unity.

As regards the elements in the image of the new life which are borrowed from the past, they generally contain a modicum of historical truth. The myth of the new life is not exactly a myth in the same sense as the Greek or Dogon myths are. And it is not an idea in the sense that there could be a timeless idea of revolution, in other words an absolute metamorphosis of life as it is (‘lived’ experience). Dynamic and stimulating, its image conjures up memories from humanity’s finest moments. Indeed, there have been (but we should be more cautious, and say: everything leads us to believe that there have been) periods which seemed positively to bloom with happiness and well-being. But we will not call them ‘well-balanced’, for the apparent clarity of the term is deceptive. Similarly, there have been periods when marvellous possibilities seemed to rise briefly on the horizon, only to fall back into the night of what had and had not been accomplished. Sadly, it seems that men become aware only after the event that beauty has died a death, and that possibilities have been extinguished. Is not all man’s history (or rather, his prehistoric era) contained in this tragedy, this power which ruins anything great or beautiful, killing whatever there is in man which deserves to live on, destroying the possibilities which can arise at any moment whenever the men of that moment allow them to pass by unexplored, and often culminating in extremes of misshapen and horrifying ugliness? This is how history is, and how nature is: a step forward, a step back, another step forward, and never in unison as in that wild optimistic dream in which every sector and every species advances simultaneously. Before the rationalized process of economic and technological accumulation came about, the dividing line between societies and nature was ill-defined. Societies had still not attained that higher unity which technical control over nature confers, and many of them disappeared, as did so many animal species. Others flourished when technology and natural conditions chanced to come together in their favour.

Like nature, history is extravagantly wasteful. Like nature, it mixes its monsters with the normal specimens produced by natural selection, and some of its successes began life as monsters (could man be an example of this?). It could be said that history, like nature, proceeds by giving birth to more or less healthy ‘mutations’, which either go on
living, or become extinct. Implacably, history operates by playing the cruel game of contradictions, hidden, unresolved, unspoken, so that in the clock tower of destiny the bell tolls: 'Too late'. 'Too late!' Too late we realize what we should have said and done, what was great, what was beautiful. For men, time and history are out of joint, and the wish to make them coincide is a feature of utopianism. History is neither god nor devil, nor is it a substitute for them. History is, and mastering it is a slow process. Could time be more difficult to control and understand than space? It would seem so. It is symptomatic that time still belongs to religion; progress and revolution have not yet succeeded in secularizing it, while science and action have long since profaned the arcana of space. Men make their own time – their destiny – but they do not know how they make it, or why. And history is still functioning like some strange power, ever more alienating despite the growth in consciousness of historical alienation. It has always destroyed what has been most beautiful and most noble, using methods of unparalleled coarseness: war, repression, politics, the development of the bad side of things. For 'things' modify and progress – or regress – by their bad side, the side that does not deserve to live. And this is also true of men.

Any presentation of the problem of the relations between history and (individual) lived experience which fails to centralize the concept of alienation sidesteps the main theoretical and practical issues. Beauty, greatness and joy have no special claim to existence; they have no ontological privileges. History has been sweeping away the illusions of philosophy ever since Plato (who even in those days looked back at the past with regret, dreaming and constructing a dimly perceived wisdom: the image of the new life lost and of the ideal city built upon this image – see the Critias).

With the advent of the new life the temporality which operates beyond the control of the will and beyond the consciousness of men would be brought to an end. Men and history would be cured of their inadequacies. History would be put to death. The possible would become a lived and living 'reality': the impossible made possible.

But the myth became renewed in historical periods closer to our times than the Greece of Pericles. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries religious community life moved from the countryside to the towns, which were being revitalized by the development of communes and guilds; we can see its legacy in the cathedrals of that time, living memories filled with symbols, shining through the layers which times and historical periods have superimposed and bringing us an image of communitarian utopianism (local community as a utopia). They afford an astonishing symbol, both material and spiritual, of collective memory at work. The opening years of the sixteenth century, with
their still-intense rural life, their active artisan class, their trade flourishing without detriment to the pre-capitalist ‘fairs’ and to pre-existing ‘structures’, have left us a few images which reveal a passionate, joyful life: in Rabelais, for example. These periods have not completely vanished. Much has survived: their songs, their images, their soul. (What a curious pleonasm: the soul is what remains when the body disappears; when a social body disappears and anything remains behind it, we call it a ‘soul’.)

It is of little importance here whether or not we agree with Hegel’s view of history as world history, or with Marx’s view of history as the history of Communism. Throughout its various transformations the image of the new life was a form of the Communist idea, an idea which would give birth to the classless society, fraternal, free, just, transparent in the recognition of its desires and the range of possibilities it would bestow on the individual.

A century after Marx, now that his entire theory can be seen in the retrospective light of the events it was to inspire, it appears more like a vast project or programme than a ‘system’. The successive interconnected processes of Marxist thought brought philosophical truth to religion (the critique of religion by philosophy), political truth to philosophy, and social truth to politics. Marx announced and prepared the way for total revolution, a historical task by means of which the proletariat would put an end to human alienation, by radical critique and absolute action. No more political and ideological alienation, no more economic alienation, and of course, no more religious alienation – such would be the aim of this revolutionary action which was to divide the duration of human history in two by bringing the prehistoric era to an end. In one leap, men organized in a free (socialist) society would pass from necessity – and above all from the necessity to accumulate – into aesthetic rapture and ethical transparency. Marx had no hesitation in announcing the end of the family, of the state and its oppressive institutions, insisting that the only thing wrong with the anarchists was that they tried to go too fast. Like Fourier, Marx desired and projected the new life. What was his perception of it? This is not clear. He was careful never to prophesy. Certainly, his vision of the future was of a sort of return to natural, primitive spontaneity, rendered greater and more magnificent by mastery over the world (by new means and by old).

It is unthinkable that the October Revolutionaries of 1917 could have foreseen the infernal spiral they were locking themselves into: the pitiless demands of an overrapid process of industrialization which was to break all the records established by primitive or capitalist accumulation. To grant Lenin such foresight would be to
demonstrate a total lack of historical acumen; not even the most obtuse of dogmatists have gone that far. Our modern dogmatists prefer to turn a blind eye to such questions. They lay down the principle of the ‘specificity’ of historical periods, events and circumstances, but they do not analyse what these specifics are any more than their predecessors did. The men of 1917, Lenin included, thought they were unleashing the world revolution; the proletariat in the most highly developed countries would rise up to a man and follow them. Once its weakest link was snapped, the entire chain would break, the fabric of imperialism would be torn asunder. And once Tsarism, the bourgeoisie and capitalism had been defeated, the reign of joy, freedom and fraternity would begin. Although Marxist methods for destroying whatever stood in the way of the productive forces were scientifically based, they nevertheless nurtured a certain utopianism. One decisive action, one decisive event, and suddenly men would leap from brute necessity and oppression to freedom; overnight, universal fraternity and justice would take over from class warfare, the conflict of dog eat dog, and oppression. Life (praxis) would be transformed. And this is where we see the intrusion of ideology, illusion or myth. ‘Soviets + electrification = socialism.’ Once the electric light had begun to shine in the democratically managed villages of Russia, the sun of the new life would dawn in all its glory. Then, alas, came Stalin, Stalin the remorseless cause and effect of a history without remorse. In truth, it was the very same extraordinary vitality which had allowed the Russian people to make the 1917 Revolution which also made them capable of withstanding disappointment, of surviving – though it was not easy – the agonies of industrialization, and of transforming Marxism into an ideology which justified and encouraged them (but an ideology, none the less! . . .).

The Popular Front took place only twenty-five years ago, and it is both easier and more difficult to determine what its ideology was. There is no shortage of good studies, but they mostly deal with the way the votes were shared out, the economic conditions, and the political events. The ideology of the Popular Front vanished before anyone could rationalize it. All we know is that in and around 1936 a great number of ideological currents converged, creating an original set of circumstances. Of course, these ideological convergences concealed other things, but what they did reveal were the objective conditions, which they translated into a variety of codes. The popular explosion of 1936 was not easy to suppress, and it had taken twenty-five more or less uninterrupted years of stupid, blinkered ‘right-wing’ government, and twenty-five years of moral order, to provoke it. The managerial bankruptcy of the old reactionary bourgeois board
members of France PLC was plain to see: stagnation, and a generalized economic, technological and demographic Malthusianism. In the bitter harvest of the counter-revolution in Europe, the fruits gathered by France were decidedly insipid. It needed the 1929–33 Depression, which affected France relatively marginally (precisely because of the stagnation), but was nevertheless a cause for concern. It needed the influence of the ‘intelligentsia’, which had continued unabated since the eighteenth century, with all that entailed: the importance of ideology and ideologies, and the participation of intellectuals in political organizations. It needed the revitalization of the young as a specific group. Only then, with the backing of the intelligentsia and the young – and even so, only provisionally – could the ‘Left’ reassemble its forces, turning its negative attitudes (the rejection of nationalism, of militarism, of capitalism) into (apparently) constructive functions. Since the question of imperialism was not yet on the agenda, the field was left clear for the problems of capitalism and political ‘reaction’.

For a long time an overwhelming feeling of disgust had been growing because of the dominant bourgeoisie’s lack of style in all areas – from those most connected to social practice to those most distant from it, from architecture to music. But it takes a while for gastro-cultural disturbances of this kind to rise in the throat.

From 1930 onwards, in the wake of an individualism which had been as excessive as it was superficial (and itself the result of a failure, the failure of the revolution in Europe: the result of it but also a diversion from it), the prestige of the notion of the collective began to grow. There was unbounded confidence in collective labour. Teamwork would revitalize science and philosophy. Nothing could be easier: it was just a question of getting down to it. Woe betide solitary individuals and small groups! The ‘macro’ was pregnant with unexpected virtues. Disorders inherent in the individual psyche would be cured by intensive social living. If the symptoms of mistrust in the collective were already apparent, they had not yet risen to the prominence which the lessons of large-scale economic organization would later confer on them. The deleterious effects of economic and political overorganization were not yet recognized. The collective, the social, socialism, Communism – these were emotional rather than intellectual conjunctions. The collective – crowds or masses – meant the end of isolation, renewal, and total immersion in an ocean of vitality. Some say that on the political level the phenomenon consisted of disturbances by which the masses ‘demonstrated’ their existence. From this point of view, large-scale ‘demonstrations’ could be read as the visible expression of an underlying political intention. This reading is too
narrow. The ‘demonstrations’ had their own independent reality and life. As a social phenomenon, as something enthusiastically alive, as an experiment in what was possible, they were, per se. These mass movements ‘demonstrated’ an ideology and a fascination. But where did the prestige of collective life, so dear to the ‘intellectuals’ (whom the facts showed to be merely the tip of an underlying social consciousness), come from? It is not easy to say. It had various components: old-fashioned lyricism (Victor Hugo), the myth of the metropolis (Paris), the repercussions of gigantic cities and their vast populations (though the latter had not yet been consciously lived out in France). Somewhere in the masses of the Popular Front was a latent political religiosity and a pilgrim mentality. It could be read in the movements of the crowd: marching slowly forward, drunk with fatigue, each individual bursting into song to disguise his doubt and solitude, a monotonously plaintive or aggressive hymn which spread a cloak of unanimity over the underlying weariness and anxiety. It was beautiful, it was even grandiose. But this enthusiasm was disappointing too, and sometimes ridiculous, like a maypole dance around mandarins, heroes and demigods – just effigies and figureheads erected to celebrate Bastille Day.

The prestige of the collective was short-lived. The spontaneity of ‘demonstrations’ soon falls flat; at which point the dough requires energetic kneading if it is to rise again. Since the days of the Popular Front the ‘collective’ has shown such an organizational aptitude for oppression, repression and ennui that its prestige has been considerably diminished. ‘Private life’ has found its introspectiveness again, and the ‘new life’ has been forgotten.

The crowds of the Popular Front brought together proletarian, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois-liberal elements: Communists (many of whom would perish), pacifists (some of whom would submit to Hitler in the name of appeasement), social democrats (of various persuasions), and even nudists and vegetarians, whose interest in politics was nil. There was a Popular Front ideology, and it is also fair to say that it was the last large-scale ideological phenomenon in French history. Just like every other large-scale ideological phenomenon, it was incoherent, and as disparate as it was powerful. It was syncretic. This syncretism was lived out by the crowds in their demonstrations, their enthusiasm acting as a kind of fusion. For one instant, as the crowds marched through the streets – a ceremonialized, ritualized, solemn, joyful festival – their unity became more important than their differences. As they jeered at the bourgeoisie peering out nervously from behind its Venetian blinds in its posh houses in the posh parts of town, they were living out enthusiasm in a negative way. It was revolt
and revolution as a form of romantic drama, the *acte gratuit* as dramatic performance. Meanwhile, in the wings, weak and disillusioned, nihilism was waiting for its cue.

What cemented these incompatible ideologies together, albeit briefly and precariously? The myth of the new life.

This took on very differing shapes. The first was a certain idea of nature. At the moment of the Popular Front, when youth felt the urge to be free, to find joy – or, more precisely, with the advent of statutory holidays with pay for the proletariat and the beginnings of organized leisure – millions of men became intoxicated with a newly discovered *nature*. The masses poured out from the cities towards the mountains and the sea, which were seen as cosmic symbols and above all as places which offered new and purifying pleasures. In this sense the masses of the Popular Front revitalized and lived out a myth of nature, while combining it with the myth of a life renewed. It was no longer just nature-as-simplicity, nature-as-health, nature-as-beauty, the nature of Rousseau, the Bois de Boulogne and Vincennes, of *déjeuners sur l'herbe* and bowls of milk from the farm; it was something more than that: nature away from the city, away from labour and the division of labour, nature untransformed by man – in a word, nature-as-escape (in Hegelian–Engelsian terms: nature ‘in-itself’). This discovery of nature ‘in-itself’ extended the cosmological romanticism of the nineteenth century into the sphere of leisure on a mass level. Today its image can still be seen in certain visual styles, and also in certain sports – potholing, mountaineering, underwater fishing – where it remains connected with the exploration of darkness and the deep, or the icy luminosity of high altitudes. Outside of these extreme cases, nature-as-escape lives on, but moderately, and without passion, in travel and books about travel. It uses vague, cosmic images as a means of avoiding a whole number of human problems. It is no longer disalienating. With it the great, fallen idea of harmony becomes tainted with package-tour triviality. But back in 1936, if the ‘old veteran’ attitude which had ossified French thought and politics for almost twenty years was to be smashed, a powerful and antihistorical ideology was called for, something both stimulating and imprecise. So it was that the image of the new life finally relegated the attitude of people who lived in the past to the past. It was a protest against reaction, whatever name it went under (and it was as much a protest against the brutally reactionary attitudes attributed to fascism as it was against the classic French Right, which merged with fascism despite the differences between them).

And so – if our hypothesis is correct – in and around 1936 the ideology of the new life joined forces with the old ideology of the Left,
just at the moment when the Communist Party became a member of the old *cartel des gauches*. This was an example of a political operation becoming transposed on to the level of ideology. The participation of the revolutionaries in the Popular Front movement led to the belief that immense changes were on the way: but the revolutionaries participated precisely because they were abandoning direct action in favour of more flexible methods (in the as yet little-understood sphere of Stalinist strategy). So the expectation of the masses ceased to be embodied directly and politically in action. Instead it drifted into ideology, tinged with utopianism, which implied both the inability to act and the desire for active intervention.

This vague ideology facilitated the coming together of the Communists and the Popular Front. It is an aspect of their conjunction. It is at one and the same time a consequence of that conjunction and its translation on to the level of action. The leaders used it to bring the long period of stagnation to an end. As far as fascist ideology was concerned, they relied quite erroneously on agitation and stimulation to dismantle it.

And now our analysis becomes more difficult and more unpalatable. In fact, documents and personal memoirs prove that at the same period, but before the French Popular Front, Hitlerian fascism was also proclaiming the new life. It too had its anticipatory ideology and its utopianism but, as would be expected, their contexts were different from those of French colonialist, rationalist democracy, with its pretensions to universality: the Hitlerian new life was situated in nature taken as an absolute. In other words, the political context of pure imperialism.

Directed primarily at the young, Hitlerian ideology rejected bourgeois life and declared it devoid both of meaning and grandeur. It rejected liberal capitalism and democracy. It predicted a vast renewal both for the middle classes, which had been shattered by the 1929–33 economic crisis, and for the equally disunited proletariat (employed versus unemployed, rival unions, rival parties).

The new life would be achieved in several stages. Stage one: intellectual conversion to a *Lebensphilosophie*, a conception of the world which exalted the cosmic life forces (as opposed to rationality), and race and nation (as opposed to universality). In the light of this vision, the simple facts of working and fighting would become metamorphosed. *Lebensphilosophie* condensed and syncretized the remnants of all the pre-capitalist ideologies which had long held Germany back in terms of industrial growth and capital accumulation. It championed enthusiasm, the abandonment of rational critique and ‘aloofness’, and the glorification of the themes of race and leadership. Thus an
extreme form of political romanticism, with specifically Germanic characteristics, was at work, organizing the image (or the myth, or the utopianism, as you wish) in a ritualistic manner. What is particularly remarkable is that the themes this cosmological romanticism was proposing were not in themselves entirely different from those of the ‘Popular Front’ ideology in France, and the theme of nature is a notable example of this.

Stage two: once the warriors had been victorious, universal domination would begin; the masters would take up residence in their era of freedom, living peacefully, like kings, even if their new life had been bought at a price. It is evident that nothing in the ideology of the Popular Front in France corresponds with this second stage. A simple fact explains why: France was a prosperous and successful imperial power.

Nowadays this history appears in a different light to twenty or thirty years ago, when it was being made. Now we can interpret it as a period in which ways were being sought of clearing the bottlenecks hindering industrial growth. The ideologies of the Popular Front and of fascism, with all their differences and analogies, can be understood as two symmetrical episodes in this period. Faced with economic stagnation (in France) or economic crisis (in Germany), the peoples and the masses want something new. Revolution fails. Something different will come in its place: war. In the interwar years, hopes take shape, only to be quickly and brutally dashed. And what emerges from this great mass of contingencies? Continued economic growth, the removal of hindrances and the clearing of bottlenecks: the advent of ‘modern’ comfort.

But would revolution have brought anything different? We may only suppose that it would have been less costly, less damaging, and better. All in all, wars and revolutions, fascism and antifascism, were episodes in the economic expansion and industrialization which those involved lived as though they were the beginnings of a new era, a new daybreak, another dawn. Philosophers have their ontological illusion; could this have been a historical illusion? Maybe. But at the moment in question, none of those involved was able to denounce it, while the politicians were clever enough to exploit it to the full.

Let us stress that the ideology of the Popular Front was incomparably more rational than Hitlerism, despite the analogous emergence of an archaic idea of nature. Why? Because of French traditions, and equally because of France’s political structure (an imperialist democracy claiming to have established the reign of freedom and rational progress throughout the colonized world).

The Popular Front had its own particular mixture of rationalism
and utopianism. There was no shortage of excellent economic arguments in favour of *abundancism*, some of them taken from Marxism. At the end of the world depression, in the mood of hesitancy about an economic revival, and in the wake of the Popular Front, it was not hard to demonstrate that the productive systems were not functioning at full throttle. If they could be made to do so, then in the large industrialized countries abundance would reign. The ‘abundancists’ had an abundance of precise, concrete statistics relating to the number of tons of corn burned because of overproduction, the number of sacks of coffee ditched in the sea, the number of machines lying idle, the number of pairs of shoes ‘producible’ to meet the needs of the developed countries, etc.²

This diffuse ideology of abundancism helped to give the Popular Front some of its impetus. Given the state of things, life could improve overnight. There could be enough of everything to allow everyone to get the most out of life. These trivial clichés are a perfect ‘reflection’ of what uneducated and educated people alike firmly believed twenty-five years ago. The new life would not be mediocre, like Heine’s ‘happy cottage’. It would be enough shoes, enough clothes, enough food for everyone, enough bread and perhaps even a few roses for the people. Utopianism and science were no longer separate.

Some serious discussions took place between abundancists and Marxists. On the economic level, there seemed to be few disagreements. These were more evident on the political level. The Marxists emphasized the importance of certain political conditions. To make abundance a reality, we must eliminate the bourgeoisie, destroy private ownership of the means of production, consolidate the political revolution by starting a planned economy, and support the Soviets and Russia (where abundance is not yet feasible, but don’t let’s talk about that). For the abundancists, it was merely a question of reorganizing distribution, controlling production, forcing industrialists to produce, and all this could be achieved within the context of democracy. On this ‘base’ it was conceivable and possible that every citizen of the industrialized nations could have an average of two pairs of shoes instead of one, and so on: economic planning could become operational fairly rapidly (so much leather, so many nails, for such-and-such a number of pairs of shoes, etc.). All things being equal elsewhere, the abundancist theory made sense. Unfortunately, it failed to take demography into account, or investment, or the growth in needs, or technological transformations and their effects, or the development of the underdeveloped nations. It was a localized ideology and, all in all, a nationalist one. Having said that, it is useful as a term of comparison for determining how far things have changed...
twenty-five years on. In 1936 it was conceivable that every individual in
the large industrialized nations could be given two pairs of shoes
instead of one, if the existing productive forces worked at full throttle.
It is much more difficult to imagine everyone having their own car,
their own plane, their own ‘dacha’. At the same time, the introduction
of nuclear energy and of electronics has revolutionized the productive
forces. For a variety of reasons, most of them military, every large
country ‘must’ have its stockpile of bombs, missiles and rockets. Every
large country ‘must’ have its space programme. In a world divided
into mutually defiant ‘camps’, these are vital needs. To satisfy these
‘needs’, enormous resources ‘must’ be forthcoming, an immense
amount of human endeavour, of research, of manpower, and we find
it difficult it foresee the consequences all this implies.

Twenty-five years ago, both Marxism and abundancism made the
same mistake of admitting the precept of ‘all things being equal else­
where . . . ’, which in fact they interpreted differently – the former
going towards economic reforms, the latter towards radical politics.
Given these differences, how was it that they managed to agree, albeit
only partially? We shall see. First, we should point out the method­
ological problems implied by the postulate: ‘all things being
equal . . . ’. Such a convention is essential if we are to reason logically.
It abstracts an object of knowledge; it circumscribes an area. Marx
used it constantly (when he assumed that the value of the workforce
was a constant, and more generally when he proposed the abstract
scheme of capitalism and reduced it to a skeleton, to its most general
laws, to the polarization of two essential classes). The postulate is
therefore methodologically viable, but it has one condition: that we
never consider it to be an undisputed truth, and that at every instant
we examine what is changing elsewhere.

Totally devoid of humour, and hastily seizing all the dogmatic pos­
sibilities which power (or the approaches to power) bring, the
abundancists produced a series of insane theories – like, for example,
the theory of vanishing money. Affluence would be achieved by sup­
pressing money, thereby suppressing markets (in Marxist terminology,
a ‘leftist’ theory). If there were a series of inflations and devaluations,
then money would blithely cease to exist. The amusing thing is that in
both France and the USSR there was a leftism which was merely a
rightism in disguise, and which helped the centrists to succeed. In
itself this leftism was not absurd. It is obvious that it is to everyone’s
advantage that optimum use be made of machines. It is obvious that
on the microeconomic level a new machine for a given production
will diminish the amount of living work (variable capital, wages)
needed for that production. It is therefore obvious, all things being
equal elsewhere, that the introduction of new technologies, including more or less total automation, destroys jobs, diminishes the labour time needed socially for a determined production, and tends to increase the capitalist surplus-value by creating unemployment, reducing wages, and increasing the poverty of the proletariat. To maintain the 'all things being equal' postulate would therefore offer a quick way round a certain number of theoretical and practical problems, especially for those who deny that economic growth is possible in the context of capitalism. It is clear that the individual capitalist will not replace one machine or one technology by another unless it is to his immediate advantage to do so. Hence the above-mentioned consequences. Reformists reply that the extension of the market and pressure from the trade unions prevent these tendencies from coming into being. But this is only half true. There are many Marxists who believe that the (cyclic or general) crisis will eliminate all the contradictions, and this is only half true too. In fact, there are other phenomena which make circumstances more complicated because they modify structures, or vice versa. Wherever new technologies are introduced, pressure will be brought to bear on all individual capitalists; new businesses will be created, and even new branches of production, producing new objects for new needs. On the level of the individual capitalist, it is not true that the introduction or construction of new machines absorbs the workforce which has been made redundant; but on the macroeconomic level of society itself, all or part of this workforce will be absorbed by the new branches of industry. So new technologies and the increase in needs both require the creation of these new branches (and we know that this process implies an extension of 'services' and a displacement of activities towards the so-called 'tertiary' sector). Capitalists find themselves caught up in a process from which they cannot escape – namely, the need for investments (which drive the ensemble of productive processes). So the essential contradictions remain unresolved; but the real process confirms neither the views of the reformists nor those of the traditional dogmatists. What all this boils down to methodologically is that we must study whatever is at work 'elsewhere', and correct the postulate: 'all things being equal . . . '. If we accept it without correction – as though it were true – then in 1936 abundancism had an objective meaning. It defined a possibility. It nourished a utopianism: the idea that history (or rather, the prehistoric era) could be brought to a halt.

In the times of the Popular Front, the people wanted the new life to bring them joy and abundance. They had holidays with pay, which in itself was a good thing, but the spontaneous wish of the masses was
for something else (which was not so much a political transformation – a reinforcement or a withering away of the state – but, quite simply, the new life!). But after that, in various ways, the ‘world’ found itself caught up in that chain of events we know only too well: history. The possible had failed, and could not not have failed, even though it had been ‘possible’. An ideology was dying. History dealt the final blow. A destructive contradiction had been at work: increasing its active forces a hundredfold, utopianism acted as a stimulus to history. But utopianism was basically extrahistorical. It postulated an end to history and to historical alienation. So history, stimulated by utopianism, killed utopia off.

The subjective side of an image is extremely important. Images stimulate actions. When an action no longer receives this stimulation – called, rightly or wrongly, ‘ideological’ – it collapses. Subjectivity becomes inactive and ineffectual, like a slack spring. From this point of view the history of the last forty years is not without its unpredictable twists and turns, its tragedies and its slapstick farces. Reactionaries and men of the Right were never able to understand why the workers of the advanced capitalist nations thought so highly of the Soviet Union. The right-wing press might publish statistical details about the standard of living in the USSR, but whether it was in 1930, 1936 or 1950, it was to no avail. The workers refused to believe them. This reactionary press might well ridicule the ‘Soviet paradise’ and parade its real or alleged defects, but for the working class this was just a smear campaign. The paradox of the history of propaganda (and there are many anecdotes to illustrate it) is that as a class organ the bourgeois press would bend over backwards in its attempts to fabricate lies, misinformation and smears. If ever there was a sign that the bourgeoisie was declining as a class, it is without a doubt its lack of imagination. When Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Report’ and other less official sources revealed the truth about Stalinism, it was far more horrendous than anything dreamed up by the bourgeoisie.

The details of this history would be highly revealing. Over this period of twenty years or so, Soviet statistics and figures showing a simple economic growth – principally in heavy industry – were interpreted by the working class of the advanced capitalist countries as an indication of a very high standard of living. It was a trust which had something spontaneous about it: all it needed was a final touch to the figures and an omission here and there (on purchasing power, for example, or the bureaucratic cogwheels of economic planning). This compliant attitude, which was not only willing to accept rather shoddy propaganda but actually embroidered on it, was shared by people who should have been more lucid and critical: intellectuals,
philosophers, economists, etc. At no point before 1955–6 did any of those involved – militant workers or 'intellectuals' – really grasp what the problems of accumulation and growth in the USSR were. But even without these illusions, and with full knowledge of the facts, the 'intellectuals' would have been justified in speaking out politically in support of the USSR. In fact, support for the Soviets was pig-headed and intellectually unsubstantiated, backed up by devious arguments and with much beating about the bush, because the issues were issues of faith, and often of blindness.

For the proletarian masses of Russia, the 1917 Revolution was to have brought the new life. The watering-down of postwar Communism and the NEP put paid to this utopianism. The revolutionaries found themselves with their backs to the wall, threatened by the economic, political and military pressures brought to bear when a poorly developed country, strategically surrounded and menaced by powers stronger than itself, tries to industrialize. But it was at this very moment that the militant workers and intellectuals of the large capitalist countries adopted the Soviet Revolution as a symbol of the new life. The myth had little to do with reality; it did not correspond to the 'bourgeois society without a bourgeoisie' which Lenin had predicted, no doubt somewhat bitterly, towards the end of his life. With the failure of the revolution in Europe, the myth of the new life – 'over there', 'up there', where there was no more bourgeoisie and no more capitalists – began to spread, in Germany and elsewhere. Unable for historical reasons to make its own revolution, the proletariat of the industrialized countries of Europe began to turn towards the USSR. It supported the USSR politically, but also projected on to it its own ambiguous hopes and lack of power. From then on, the 'bourgeois' press, radio and publishing industry could publish as many truths or lies as they liked; anti-Soviet propaganda could swamp the world with misinformation and phoney documents; Soviet propaganda could be as grossly distorted, in the opposite direction, as bourgeois propaganda. It was all irrelevant. The working masses went on dreaming of the 'Soviet paradise', refusing to accept either bourgeois propaganda or 'Communist' propaganda when it became too vulgar or when, as was sometimes the case, it tried to give correct information and scientific facts. The image the masses carried within themselves was unassailable. Men needed it to stay alive. They were more or less indifferent to what the news might say; aspiring as they did to the new life, perceiving it as possible, it was inevitable that they should see post-Revolutionary Russia as the living incarnation of the idea and the dream of Utopia.

A kind of double or two-phase projection was in operation. The
militant intellectuals put their confidence and hope in the working class; they saw the workers as a class and as individuals who possessed the human qualities the bourgeoisie lacked: goodness, generosity, theoretical veracity and practical honesty, accurate critical sense, the sense of justice, liberty and living fraternity, the taste for freedom. Thus for a large number of non-proletarians the proletariat (in France and in Germany) embodied hopes for an imminent renewal of life. As for the proletariat, it concentrated its hopes on the Soviet working class, a class which held political power. The result of this double projection was a twofold squandering of energy and lucidity, a singular lack of resistance to ideologies, plus an inevitable scepticism, and the spectre of nihilism on the horizon.

Thus, for many years, we (the present speaker and many others) lived out a kind of myth of the proletariat; it was a myth, but not completely so, since it contained some objective and rational elements. In so far as it hoped for and announced the advent of the new life, it was utopian and mythic; while the proletariat – or rather, its representatives – showed themselves to be essentially the means by which economic accumulation in the underdeveloped countries could be speeded up. From this point of view, it functioned as a stimulating ideology. Moreover, reasoning de absurdo, it is clear that if the working class in the capitalist countries had not supported the movement against imperialism to a certain extent, there would never have been any Soviets, nor a Chinese Revolution, nor would any of the underdeveloped countries have been promoted to the rank of free nations and states. If the working class had not provided the peasant movements with an ideology, a terminology, objectives and contexts, a number of countries would not have been able to transform their agriculture (by more or less total agrarian reform, and the use of the more or less traditional peasant commune). Similarly, if the proletariat of the developed countries had not brought constant pressure to bear on the bourgeoisie, the purchasing power of the masses would have fallen, and the theory of absolute poverty would have proved true in the major capitalist countries; the system of production and fixed capital would not have been modified, the conditions of production and technology would not have been overturned, and capitalism would not have been revitalized.

In accordance with Marx's concepts, the proletariat has shown itself to be a social and political force on a world scale. The predicted world revolution continues. But contrary to those concepts, the proletariat has not shown itself capable of interrupting history – or man's prehistoric era – and eradicating alienations by creating the new life. What has it been socially and politically able to achieve to date? The
industrialization of the globe – or, to put it another way, the globalization of industrialization.

If a country is to revolutionize the relations of production and property (which effectively means the social and political death of the dominant class *per se*), several conditions are necessary. Lenin has analysed them. There must be a triple offensive, in the economic, political and cultural sectors. Our brief analysis of the Popular Front movement above underlined the extreme complexity of such total phenomena. However, the triple character of their dimensions constitutes a relatively determined and stable ‘structure’, which implies the need to organize politically, economically and culturally (using theory or ‘ideology’) – that is, a Party. The rules of this Party should stipulate its relation with internal and external democracy, according to the Marxist–Leninist argument by which (concrete) proletarian democracy, the extension and realization of (formal) bourgeois democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state are multiple aspects of a single process. As regards organizational modalities on the cultural level, they should be specific, but sufficiently flexible to permit a conscious pluralism of tendencies and constructs, thus avoiding any dogmatically imposed system.

A structure can live only within a certain set of circumstances. This is the real significance of the ‘circumstance–structure’ dialectic. Compared with the (relative) stability of structures, circumstances are linked with history, historicity and becoming. They are favourable or unfavourable to a certain structure – either upholding and reinforcing it, or corroding and exploding it. If circumstances are unfavourable, the necessary structure will not take root, will not thrive, and will not become active. If circumstances are unfavourable, the structures for action chosen by a revolutionary movement will not be sufficient to dismantle established structures, nor will they be capable of superseding themselves in the course of their action. *The proletariat is not revolutionary by ontological essence or by absolute structure. It is revolutionary in certain circumstances, but (given favourable circumstances) only the proletariat can be revolutionary right to the end.*

This is a way of relativizing Marx’s arguments and assertions about the proletariat as a universal class, of qualifying them in the light of historical experience, and attempting to express them in precise language. *Circumstances and structures* are two aspects of a total process: economic, sociological, ‘ideological’ and cultural. No one has the right to immobilize a structure and then use it as a soapbox to dogmatize from, and no one has the right to make circumstances a soapbox for denying the importance of structures. One-sidedness and immobility are incompatible with dialectical thinking.
Movements in history (or, if you like, the prehistoric era) take place only when they are stimulated by contradictions, the foremost of which are class struggles, be they muffled, latent or overt. In the advanced capitalist countries, the tridimensional movement (economic, political, cultural) generally remains incomplete. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, economic (trade-union) action by the working class predominates, whereas political action is minimal and cultural action virtually nil; the unions tend to act as a lobby for the working class in parallel with other lobbies and pressure groups, and it is this coexistence in competition which defines economic democracies. The most cursory analysis would reveal the partial immobility and mutilated character of any situation 'structured' in this way.

It is equally mutilating for the historical importance of the working class when people attribute a 'moral vocation' to it (for example, André Gorz in *La morale de l'histoire*). By defining their ethic as something cultural (which is hardly self-evident) they are reducing the working class to the level of a purely cultural phenomenon. As for the Stalinist and neo-Stalinist dogmatists, they are just as mutilating when they see the political factor as an ontologically privileged absolute.

The feelings, images and ideas forged during the period of the Popular Front – although it was already well in the past – supported many people right up until 1950: until Zhdanovism³ and even until the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Nothing is more difficult to eradicate than naivety – real, spontaneous naivety – because nothing else is so pure and so deep-rooted. Once it has been cut out and removed, nothing is more difficult to replace. It leaves a wound which never heals.

Was not the wave of existentialism among the young intellectuals of the Liberation a last glimmer of the Popular Front? Through its vague concepts and variegated definitions of 'existence' can we not glimpse that old cosmological romanticism which linked individual consciousness with the cosmos (the *Grund*, the existential)? The network of mediations (social practice, social groups) which Jean-Paul Sartre is so busy trying to rediscover today was ignored. Can we not see in this movement the covert revival of that post-1914–18 cosmological romanticism, that contradictory tug of war between symbolism and revolution known as Surrealism?

When Zhdanovism was crudely imported to France, one of the most stupid things it did was to discredit this romanticism on the pretext of extending the strategic situation of the year 1950 to all sectors: ideology, the sciences, philosophy, the arts. In fact, with the coming of the Cold War, many a heart, many a man, many an aggressive passion went into permanent deep-freeze. The elements of consciousness and
culture destroyed in this way may well have been suspect, and already in decline; nevertheless, nothing was put back to replace them. This destruction of a sensibility long nourished by the myth of the new life left a void which added to the general theoretical and ideological vacuum, intensifying it to an agonizing degree. The consequences were disastrous, the remedies worse than the illness. Arguing de absurdo and in the conditional tense again, all we can think nowadays is: ‘If a world war had broken out in 1950, Zhdanov would have set the conditions for a successful ideological struggle: he would have paved the way for a victory by the Soviet and socialist side by confronting whatever does not come from the bourgeoisie with whatever does come from it, while keeping the proletariat standing to attention in readiness for action. He would have replaced the myth of the new life with the myth of proletarian science and socialist art.’ Since war did not break out, this hypothesis is mistimed. All we can say is that Zhdanovism wrought havoc upon cultural and theoretical life in France; more than that, it destroyed a treasure-house of symbols, attacking areas of sensibility at their very nucleus. True, for dogmatists all this is fairly irrelevant. Art, sensibility, feelings – they must all give way before political activity. Thus will they murder art just as they murdered philosophy, ostensibly turning its own weapons on it to do the deed. Perhaps that is their historical mission.

Is it correct to insist that Stalinism and Zhdanovism put nothing back to replace the myth it was destroying, the myth of the new life? Not completely. During this period, in and around 1950, there was much talk about the new man. The Stalinists confronted the old with the new. This was a mystification – all the more so because it was not entirely false, and because there really was something new! It offset the only-too-real sacrifices for the future made by present generations through work and through war. The man of Communist society, the man of the future, was becoming a reality; he was embodied in ‘the Communist’. Of course, when partisans sang of this great novelty and poured insults on anyone who expressed the slightest doubt, all critical and dialectical analysis of it had been cast aside. The new life was no longer a utopian dream, it was a concrete part of practical and social reality; the Stalinists and Zhdanovists did their utmost to harness the old hopes and expectations, and to force them into this set of images.

The illusion was short-lived. And in any case, was it an illusion? Thanks to the works he inspired and the enormous ennui he exuded, it was soon clear what the ‘new man’ looked like. Permanence led to the substitution of autocritique with a kind of triumphalism, which took its ideological self-justification to a logical conclusion with inflexible
reasoning and unimpeachable moralizing. Oh, this new man had – and still has – no shortage of qualities! Quite the reverse: he had – he still has – rather too many. He has the virtues of the good soldier and the good old veteran, supplemented by those of the good worker. He is decent, fraternal, paternal, strict but kind, strong, serious, solemn, energetic but lenient, etc. He displays the virtues of a good father and a good citizen, raised to the level of a great people, a great nation and a great party. The new man, the so-called Communist man, has only one failing: he is a bore. This twentieth-century stereotype oozes ennui like a damp wall. His very being is a denial of dialectic. He must be secretly injected (in homeopathic doses, so as not to kill him) with vitamins and hormones: conflicts, contradictions. He is congenitally deficient in them. He is a marble block, a monolith. Around this great deficiency, smaller ones cluster. The ‘new’ shell soon wears thin, revealing some familiar qualities and characteristics: the grim desire for prestige and power (and the material advantages which come with them), the instinct and aptitude for intrigue, ambition, unscrupulousness, practical immorality, political Machiavellianism and intellectual dishonesty raised to the level of high art, the exploitative manipulation of ideas. . . .

The only new thing about this new man is that everything about him is old; he even carts around all the old rubbish which hope for the new life had cast aside. His philosophical and political realism kills off utopianism without putting anything in its place. His moralism kills off the imaginary. His pragmatism and empiricism kill off symbolisms and poetry. His positivism kills off negativity, starting with the murder of radical critique.

Despite some daring operations verging on intellectual gangsterism (such as making the Party man and the Stalinist militant synonymous with the man of the society of the future, the Communist man), the graft has failed to take. The ideological transfer has come unstuck. The new man has not replaced the new life. This has provoked an extreme backlash, and now there are people who even deny that militants and those living and adapting in a bourgeois society without a bourgeoisie – to use Lenin’s definition – have any qualities at all. They forget that the bourgeoisie held these selfsame virtues and ideals, but was never able to realize them.

What does the working class – if the concept can still be disengaged from the philosophical ontology and mythology which have been grafted on to it – represent for dialectical analysis? It represents and presents the human process in its totality: need, labour, pleasure. It presents it effectively and practically, in social life. The alienation of the bourgeoisie makes the bourgeois individual an abstraction and
deprives him of one of these dimensions: need, labour. The alienation of the proletarian individual reduces him to labour and basic needs, but leaves him concrete and practical. In this sense, the proletarian is privileged, as Marx realized. But it is not the privilege which dogmatists would grant. The human phenomenon is revealed in social practice. Compared to this dynamic, structured totality, the reality of the bourgeoisie is mutilated (alienated). The bourgeoisie represents nothing but the pure desire for absolute sensual satisfaction, something it cannot achieve and which thus becomes the opposite of satisfaction – the absence of desire and creative activity. On the other hand, to represent the working class simply as hard-working is equally mutilating, and alienates reality.

But despite all this, and whether or not it is in a position of power, the proletariat cannot give up its claim to totality in relation to needs, their nature and their quantitative and qualitative increase; in relation to labour, and its organization and protection; and in relation to physical satisfactions and their heightening (the organization of leisure so as to afford individuals more initiative, games and sports, housing, everyday life). It is less and less possible for the claims of the working class to be limited to wages, politics or the structure of the state. These claims cannot be defined morally or politically, they can only be defined as a totality. The working class is becoming a totality, while the bourgeoisie represents nothing but mutilation and alienation.

Was the longing for the new life just a vague and premature formulation of this claim to totality? It probably was. Can the claim to totality succeed in creating a new life? That is the problem now.

At this point, the author requests permission to introduce an abridged version of some notes he wrote some time ago, entitled (naively) The New Athens:

Athenian democracy, besmirched by slavery, incomplete but real, the cause and effect of freedom, disappeared only with independence. Athens, as a city-state, was neither the most nor the least important power of its age. The Athenian Republic could not equal the mighty Persia, but it outclassed the little towns and ports of the Sporades and the Mediterranean. Around it were grouped many towns, created or protected by the Athenians. Right up until they ceased to exist politically they were able to be intensely active in commerce, philosophy and science. They circulated their ideas with their merchandise and their money with their logic, the money of the mind. If they were not the greatest by virtue of their power (and Alexandria, then Rome, vanquished them), they were so by virtue of their spirit. It is probably to them that we owe the (rather unclear) concept of spiritual greatness. In so far as we are able to under-
stand them, the Athenians’ relations with one another combined a certain gentleness and practical rationality with a great deal of energy, vitality and courage; if they knew how to enjoy life in their own homes, they were also able to defend their city, and their sometimes excessive urbanity did not restrain them from acting on occasions with regrettable violence, nor did it soften their obstinate will to power. Nevertheless their guilt and brutality fade away as soon as we fall under the spell of their social life, which successfully combined charm with the austere quest for truth. Is there no place in the modern world for the New Athens and the New Greece, a country which would be neither too large nor too small, which would be able to stand on its own two feet, and where courage and sophisticated culture would be combined? Is not our working class the most gifted in the world in terms of knowing how to get the best out of life? It is not easily fooled. The proletarians of France know that man does not live simply to get the best out of life; they know that to live one must work, and to live well one must work well. Their social practices seem to bring back the bourgeois skills of the eighteenth century: the art of happiness, an intelligent Epicureanism, an art of sensual enjoyments. They couldn’t give a damn for materialist philosophy as such. They have learned their social practices with enormous good nature, reasonably – like the Greeks, without excess, without going over the top – and spontaneously. Above all, we must never burden them with heroism, or productivism, or science, or political action: that would compromise what they have achieved and held on to. For perhaps it is they who will reconstitute passionate, concrete reason. Perhaps it is they who will rediscover the secret of a lost harmony, the secret of an education which would train individuals in the art of living and which would control technology, the secret of a moderate humanism, without megalomaniacs and without giants, one which has as its aim the fulfilment of individual life. . . .

Yes, it’s all a dream, a romantic, utopian version of that classic myth, the myth of the New Greece. But I would not be unhappy to see the proletariat trying to make it a reality. Has the New Greece any chance of ever succeeding? I have no idea. Ancient Greece and its beauties were not able to survive their own contradictions; the conflicts which stimulated the genius of the Greek city-states were also responsible for their political demise. Enormous, barbarous empires, like Alexander’s, Caesar’s and Augustus’s, swept them away. A modern, moderating France based on ‘nothing in excess’ despite being industrialized, and managed by the proletariat according to its own interests in a concrete democracy – would it be viable, and for how long? Would it be capable of keeping an alliance of peoples around it without curtailing their freedom? Would it not still be faced with the
alternatives of unlimited industrialization or stagnation? In any case, perhaps her specific virtues and qualities are destined to disappear, whether she takes the American way, or the Soviet path towards high technicity and industrialization on a gigantic scale. So what remains of the dream of the New Greece?

Here we come up against several old problems which as yet we have left unexamined. It is possible to suppose that by its action (economic, political, cultural), the working class will retain or introduce changes in the way society develops; in other words, the concepts of 'industrial civilization' and 'technological civilization' may still be considered to be tainted with speculative abstraction. Will the changes – and notably those brought about by proletarian 'aspirations' (a vague word, but the best there is . . .) – go so far as to create a 'new life'? There is reason to fear that the working class qua class may extend (bourgeois) comfort more generally, struggling in its own way against (bourgeois) boredom, differentiating civilization into (bourgeois) layers, and still not managing to create a style of living.

The new life? Oh irony! – for some it is coming to pass at the very moment when the idea of it is becoming blurred. And if utopianism is disappearing, it is because reality is taking over from it. The new life is comfort, well-being, fitted kitchens, leisure activities. The growth in needs and the hope that they can be completely satisfied are determining the nature of claims, which for the working class and its associates – technicians and office workers – are becoming increasingly specific and localized. Claims for job security, more availability of credit to raise the standard of comfort, organized leisure activities, as well as participation in management and decision-making organisms, are now as important as demands for higher wages.

Is that what the image of the new life was? Yes and no. Yes, because people wanted their lives to be pleasant. And no, because their goal was not just a washing machine, a fridge or a car. It was infinitely more: the profound, obscure desire for relations to be transformed, for needs to be transmuted into actions, and for every object in the world around us to become a work of art.

But others will object that the new life does not mean comfort. It means technology and love of technicity and the longing for what technicity makes possible: in a word, the cosmic adventure.

Indeed, for many people, innovation in life is synonymous with technicity. Technical objects, be they scooters, IBM computers or interplanetary rockets, are passionately interesting; they give enormous pleasure and provoke a feeling of novelty, just as much by the way they function scientifically as by the way they can be used empirically. When we caress a mechanism we are playing with material force and
power embodied and spiritualized by knowledge. This technological sensibility resolves the opposition between nature and culture. Technicity opens a door on to another dimension. Human praxis has produced a second nature which has become superimposed upon the first, penetrating it, covering it, clothing it. The social and individual man can find satisfaction; it is as though labour and sensual enjoyment were finally coinciding. In this sense, and up to a point, technicity and humanism are not mutually exclusive. Technicity is not necessarily the catastrophically ‘reifying’ frozen power which some thinkers find so terrifying. Those who defend technology are not completely wrong when they accuse its detractors of peddling an apocalyptic vision.

So how does disappointment in technicity arise? From the fact that interest in it, like all interests, is quickly exhausted. As soon as we know how a technical object works and how to make it work, our concentration starts to wander. We must look for something else. If it is to be maintained, the technological sensibility needs ever-accelerating technological progress. Conversely, accelerated technological progress will constantly destroy interest in technicity, only to renew it again. Technological progress forces the individual and social man to accept the constraints of technicity; he plays his part in this destiny, forging ever forward without knowing where he is heading, and without needing to know. Pleasure in technology has very little to do with culture, although it may be seen as a fact of modern cultural life.

So the search for the new life takes on a contradictory form: flight from technicity, escape, return to pure nature – as ‘pure’, as raw, as possible. People group together (in canvas villages – ‘leisure societies’, as Henri Raymond put it) or, conversely, set out alone to seek escape. They lose themselves, immerse themselves in the sunlight, the heat, the cold, in water, in air. They try to re-create themselves by creating another world, or trying to reach it by putting their lives at risk. The world ‘in-itself’ must be the true one. Once more the mythic or symbolic idea of nature becomes revitalized – or, if you prefer, the idea of nature becomes remythicized and resymbolized, and by modern means: high-speed transport, hi-tech equipment. The break between the social and the extrasocial (or the new, ‘alternative’ society, the leisure society) is socially organized, and commercialized.

Effectively, when technicity is fetishized, it functions as though it were another nature. The modern individual faces the destiny of technology blindly, unconcerned by the powers the ‘controls’ possess, and revelling in his blindness and powerlessness like primitive man confronted by the symbols of the world. Technological sensibility gives the individual an illusory sense of supersession, devouring him
while appearing to exalt him, and fetishizing the power of the technical object and its ‘controls’ over human beings. In a similar manner, good citizens are proud of their state, of their statesmen and their policies. Of their own free will – or almost – they abdicate their freedom to theorize and their individuality in terms of praxis. The state and technicity become the same: a second nature. Man is weakening himself, and acknowledges this weakness; he revels in his weakness in the face of this second nature, which inspires him with feelings of religious awe and admiration.

As for the idea of nature ‘in-itself’, it carries with it a great illusion. Leisure activities and holidays must be the true life. The true life starts the moment we go away. Pure nature and pure pleasure must go hand in hand. Alas, this is how labour, family and objective morality call the wandering sheep back into the fold. For those whose eyes are dazzled by the illusion, what is real becomes the opposite of what is true, and life as it truly is (real life) becomes the opposite of the true life. The true life parts company with life as it truly is, and the ideal loses its link with reality. They are severed for ever. Reality reveals truth to be an illusion, and the phoney exaltation of nature destroys our links with the world as it really is. After this mutual belittlement, what are we left with? An enormous disappointment.

The myths of pure technicity and pure nature are mutually supportive, and mutually destructive. Try the following experiment: go to Chamonix and take the cable car for the Aiguille du Midi. There are all kinds of people in the cabin with you: babies, old men, foreigners enjoying the ease and comfort of the trip like the experienced travellers they are. Are you fascinated by heights? Soon the seracs, glaciers and vertiginous rock faces start parading past you like so much cardboard, and the scenery of Mont Blanc begins to look not a little stagey. Near the Vallée Blanche, if you’re lucky enough to spot some climbers roped together for the difficult and dangerous ascent, you may become conscious of a strange feeling. These men’s lives are absorbed in this climb, their bodies accomplish it; for them the mountain represents pure nature, whereas you are being effortlessly lifted to the summit by modern technology. They make you seem pathetic. But then, you make them seem pathetic too. Why bother to make the effort? What’s the point? Surely it’s as ludicrous as wanting to live in a shepherd’s hut, as old-fashioned as a paraffin lamp?

And so, what are we left with? Nihilism?

Not necessarily. Not yet, at any rate. We can merely attempt to draw some provisional conclusions:

(1) In so far as we are able to make predictions based upon our
experience, we may say that today the image of the new life has lost some of its power to stimulate.

(2) Most of the modern forms of this image do not stand up to critique. Once it is revealed for what it is, ideology loses all but the most superficial effectiveness. Ideology leads to an awareness of ideology. Once ideology has been rendered conscious, it is powerless. An awareness of ideology means the end of ideology.

(3) At any period in history, aspirations will be confused, and ideology, utopianism, symbols and myths will be inextricably combined in the minds of those who are living within them. Only later can they be separated, especially if an analyst sets to work on them. Ideology collapses and vanishes; utopianism atrophies, but something great is left behind: the memory of a hope. Myths and symbols become recharged with new meanings, but the process is a slow one.

However, in the confusion of 'lived' experience, ideology and utopianism are not merged. The utopian image is something lived. It is the image of what is possible, and more than that image: the image of what is possible transferred into reality. It appears as an immediate possibility in the process of becoming reality, and consequently as the overturning of reality as it currently is. As for ideology, it projects itself as an established truth; although it justifies the expected changes to reality, it is less effective than the utopian image.

Therefore both in the present and in the possible future a dialectical movement seems to be at work. In the present, ideology and utopianism merge despite their differences. In the possible future – in other words, in subsequent developments – ideology and utopianism (as well as myths and symbols) are revealed, splitting up to pursue their various destinies.

This analysis differs from the one proposed by the sociologist Mannheim. He disparages utopianism, and seems to disregard its role in the questioning of existing circumstances, precisely because of its negativity and the predominant role it accords to images, dreams and aspirations: the presence of what is possible. He therefore exaggerates the links between utopianism on the one hand and ideology and myth on the other; he fails to conceptualize their dialectical relations. As for his 'total concept' of ideology, it is based on a confusion. Ideology, utopianism, myths and symbols appear to constitute the elements of a total (social) phenomenon. Therefore, every ideology per se is only partial. Every ideology per se gives form and perspective to aspirations, interests and realities (those of the group which 'aspires' to this or that – those of the partners or adversaries, which ideology distorts and disparages). But there is never a 'total' ideology which could be totally false, a totally false consciousness of self and of others.
Absolute falseness, error or untruth would, *ipso facto*, be absolute truth. Dialectic would collapse.

(4) For all that, ideology and utopianism still retain a mystifying function. During a long period of time, and above all in 1936, the utopianism of the new life merged with the more specifically economic ideologies (abundancism, economic planning, interventionism). This concealed the failure of the proletarian revolution in the advanced industrial countries, Stalinism and its strategy (the exploitation of world contradictions), and the consequences of the 'cosmological principle' as a cultural diversion, etc.

(5) The impetus of utopianism, and of hope for the new life, appears to be an indispensable feature in the dynamics of the social forces. Therefore we can ask ourselves whether the image of the classless society for some peoples, and the image of the *withering away of the state* for others (France, notably) cannot recharge this impetus. Without it, society stagnates, or thinks it is stagnating, even when it is in fact changing.

(6) On the other hand, we can also ask ourselves whether we can still rely on the transformations of global society – and even on the effectiveness of the most 'advanced' class, the proletariat – to create a new life, in the sense of the profound promises and aspirations history instils and reveals within us. We must note a certain inability on the part of the working class as personified by its ideologies (for we can judge it only by its ideological credentials, so to speak) to explore possibilities and choose between them. Future modes of alienation and disalienation? Limitless production and productivity? Conquest of the earth and the stars? New enjoyment of what the earth has to offer, materially and aesthetically? Limitless leisure, non-work? We are incapable of imagining the future and opting for one or other of these possibilities. Yet we know only too well that opt we must! To give an example: if leisure and non-work are extended as a result of automation, how will people employ their free time? How will they avoid getting bored? We do not know. Certainly the image of the classless society and the productivist ideology of the Eastern bloc are both incapable of providing us with an answer.

Therefore 'totalities' (industrial society or societies, peoples and nations, the working class) no longer appear to usher in a new life – or, in other words, a lifestyle, or a life with any style to it. This is also true of large groups such as bureaucrats, technologists and technocrats. Every new activity they initiate inaugurates a new absence of style.

More generally, in so far as 'modernity' is part and parcel of economic or technological growth and the processes of accumulation, it
cannot produce a style. Instead it spends its time struggling against
the boredom of the absence of style, or trying to turn the clock back,
exhuming old styles, myths and symbols from a pre-capitalist past.

Nowadays our cultural aspirations are sustained and nourished by
our knowledge of centuries of artistic heritage. Hence a contradic­
tion: to aspire culturally is to destroy what has gone before. What
knowledge of the past reveals is style (in life, in wisdom, in creativity).
And style does not repeat itself.

The problem of style is a pressing one, and increasingly so. Not the
problem of literary style; not - or not only - the problem of style in
terms of aesthetics; but the problem of style in life.

The dilemma gives us much food for thought: should it be a ques­
tion of lifestyle, or of cultural activities creating a style which would
enter into praxis after being embodied in works of art? What should
be foregrounded? What should come first? Or should they come together?
Although we are aware that this problem is a worrying one (con­
sciously or unconsciously) for many young people, we will put it to
one side temporarily in order to turn to a more general one.

**Does the responsibility for creating a style nowadays rest with groups smaller
than the social totalities?**

It can be argued that inventions and creations (in the domain of
lifestyles) have always been lived out by relatively small groups: avant­
gardes, sects, monastic orders, secret societies, heresies, clandestine or
semi-clandestine political parties. Individuals and global societies have
had less creative power than individualists on the one hand, and par­
tisans of the collective on the other, would like to believe. In any case,
these are often one and the same, playing off one point of view
against the other. Highly gifted individuals possess great powers of cre­
ativity, of course, but they require an enormous amount of material
and spiritual support. If they do not become part of a group, they will
find their creativity severely curtailed. It is all as though ‘production’
in its widest sense - creativity - operates at the heart of active groups,
not too large, not too small; and these act as mediators between indi­
vidual life and the possibilities inherent in the masses and peoples,
social practice, and the economic ‘base’. These are possibilities which
the masses and peoples are unable to make explicit (because they are
active and ‘productive’ but non-reflective, since there is no such thing
as an automatic reflection of praxis, and moreover, invention and
creation need more than mere reflection). These considerations lead
us back to utopianism, but in a way which is determined: to the use of
utopianism as a means of investigating what is possible. This is where
there is something new in the idea of the new life. Today, what is the
aim of utopian investigation? The conquest of everyday life, the re-creation of the everyday and the recuperation of the forces which have been alienated in aesthetics, scattered through politics, lost in abstraction, severed from what is possible and what is real.

It goes without saying that this problem of the mastery and liberation of everyday life is a pressing one in the old (spontaneous, historical) cities. But it is even greater and more urgent for the new towns, where the objects of modern technology are in a state of open confrontation with everyday life. In the new towns technical objects must be transformed as part of the transformation of everyday life, otherwise the failure will be irreparable.
Can we hold a dialogue with an image? Is it proper to address a symbol?

If I try to hold a conversation with a signal, I must be mad, and pathetically so. Try talking to the traffic lights on the corner of the street. No matter how much you insult them or plead with them, they will just ignore you: they go on working. They are there, and that's that. All manner of things could do their job equally well: a bell, a gong, a fountain, a perfume atomizer (why not, in fairyland?). A signal does what it says, says what it does, and nothing more; it says what it has to say and does what it has to do, imperturbably, impersonally – unless it goes wrong, in which case it stops working. It issues its positive and negative commands loudly or silently; it is imperative and precise. I am conditioned by signals, I behave as they tell me to behave, I become their reflection. Abstract, the signal never goes beyond the constraints of its own signification, and is curiously like a thing devoid of meaning. It wields the same icy power as a thing. Equally, it never lies. As basic as a thing in all its nakedness, the signal is what it is. Yet it has a use; it fits me into a system. How could I drive through life without these signals? There are more and more of them. There are also many people, some of them very important indeed, who are nothing more than signals: signals for thought or morality, for alarm or sorrow, stimulants for fake happiness or anguish. There are many things which are signals: this door I go through every day and which closes behind me, this table which traps me in my profession, this everyday chair. . . .

At the other pole, myths are just as imperative as signals, though in a different way. From the moment a myth has any power, the keywords which express it provoke terror or reassurance. It is alive or dead; it speaks to me or is silent; I reject it or accept it. I have no power over it; ‘it’ has nothing in common with things, and if I discuss it, I am already on a different wavelength; I try to escape; if it is dead, I revive it; if it is alive, I discredit it; it is not I who make myth appear ambiguous, but vice versa.
If the symbolic image comes from the depths of time and the universe, if it expresses something (rationally) uncertain and unthinkable, if it signifies the contact of the present moment with those enigmatic depths (and if its message to me is one of heartbreak and pain), then how could I not talk to it as though it were my own image, facing me, outside of me, still and forever me?

The crucified sun is the symbol of division, humiliation, failure and hopelessness. The sun bears evidence of its own contradiction and denial; it bears its death and the instrument of death. Black lines, rigid and intersecting at right angles, brand the image of the source of fire with a funereal blazon. Its message is no longer the joy and passion of reason. Crucified, the sun loses its nature under the imprint of the cross which eclipses its splendour. The cross proclaims an end to the cosmic circle, the cosmic cycle of creative love whose repetitions are never in vain because they spread its seeds throughout space and time. It is the multiple symbol of lost and blighted youth, of revolution darkened by the shadow of its own history, of a generation, of an era, of passionate countries scarred by slavery and wars and the destiny of their own liberation, the countries of the Orient, of Asia, of Africa. What more did this symbol of alienation need for its meaning to become clear and publicly exposed in the street for all to see, explicit and obscene? It needed one final insult, one final humiliation, one final moment of degradation. And that moment has arrived.

Since I wrote and published my first description of the crucified sun, its image has appeared all over the walls of Paris. The crude, sordid graffiti are everywhere; two signs: a circle, a cross. A crowd of little fascists have adopted and appropriated it, turning its meaning inside out. For them it means ancient Gaul plus Christianity. They have absolutely no intention of setting the sun free. In their minds they have purchased a job lot: nature and religion, the solar cult of the Celts (and the Celtiberians) and the cult of Christ, the one with the other, the one on top of the other. Thus the symbol of alienation becomes a symbol of life. In other words, their alienation becomes their life.

How can we refuse to hold a dialogue with this image which has become a hideous shadow? How can we not address it, this symbol, as it spins in its orbit of meaninglessness and hopelessness?

A couple of billion years ago (why be stingy where time is concerned?) a star wandered close to the sun. The proximity of this star created enormous tides on the sun's surface. A huge tidal wave swept across the burning ocean, as different from our earthly tides as the moon would be from the wandering star or our earth from the sun itself. Far away in space and time, a jet of foaming igneous matter
spurted forth. These fragments could not escape from their nucleus completely, and began to circle around their point of origin, a family of planets of which our earth is one. . . .

This is how some physicists and geophysicists describe the beginnings of this microcosm of ours. It is an attractive picture, not only for scientific reasons but also for what one might call poetic and metaphilosophical reasons. Tormented by a star which was, according to the regional or general laws of the universe (the double-faced, double-determined universe: physical reality and obscure impulse), both near and far away, a gigantic source of creative energy tortured by limits, finiteness and chance encounters, the sun impregnated space and time with the seeds – sperm or matrices – of the planets, and this little world – so large compared with us – was created. In this way the exactness of science and poetic vision converge in an ever-possible, ever-questioned, ever-renewed conjunction.

We should add that this picture appears to be incomplete. Why? Because it excludes the information provided by microphysics: the study of much smaller phenomena such as harmonics, resonances, static states in minute vibrations, and the activity at the heart of atoms. We may presume that phenomena analogous to these occur not only on a molecular scale, on our scale, but also on the vast scale of sidereal phenomena (although to a certain extent the specificity of levels and scales must be taken into account). Thus, one day, models constructed at different levels could be united, something which would be consonant with the idea of supersession. However, the intersection of the two ‘ways of seeing’, the one according to material physics and the other according to impulse or desire, is only imaginary. A material ontology which granted matter the secondary attribute (or mode of existence) of impulse (the Trieb of the German philosophers of nature), desire or anguish, and brought the dualism of determinations and images to an end, would seem either premature or outdated. It smacks of Spinozism.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that the images of divinity and the sun – the superimposed signs of shadow and light – have a meaning. Science can give some archaic myths not so much a validity as a new meaning. This does not imply that there is some kind of truth in the history of myths and of intuitions about the cosmos, but it does force us to try to reach a better understanding of the way symbols slowly metamorphose.

The symbol of the crucified sun emerges from the obscure and luminous abyss of intuitions about the cosmos which predate reflective thought, discursive consciousness and the insertion of knowledge into praxis. It emerges from an even stranger abyss, that passionate
abyss we call ‘nature’, the abyss of the energies and creative impulses of the world. It is both expressive and signifying. It expresses the infinity and splendour of material nature. It signifies – through the signs it carries, the circle and the cross – the finiteness of everything that is.

‘Crucified sun, what is your message when I encounter you in the streets, materialized on walls, reduced to your most basic expression – a circle, two lines – multiplied by the hands of people I despise and who certainly feel the same about me, what is your message to me, you double, you shadow, you symbol of hopelessness and pain, you whom I saw for the first time above my head on a lonely road, a fearsome giant circle nailed to the heart of a gigantic cross?’

‘Myths speak; they express and they mystify. When things are given meanings they deceive, like faces, eyes, lips. Symbols magnify and delude, they dramatize and mystify – even people like these boys who draw crude circles and crosses on walls without knowing on whose behalf they are acting, or how they are being exploited. What is actually happening becomes exaggerated once it is dramatized. Journalists dramatize. They excel at sensationalizing trivial events. They write the soap opera of everyday life which masks its everyday triviality. Politicians dramatize, too. . . Remember! Remember! . . . Remember your lives, your loves, your actions and your long-suffering resignation. But it was more sordid and more impoverished than anything dreamed up by the literary hacks, the journalists and philosophers. The philosophy of the sordid and the metaphysics of the absurd, miserabilism and dolorism, even transcendental philosophy, which methodically disparages life – all have expressed this impoverishment inadequately; as for the politicians, they have metamorphosed it into some kind of grandiose tragedy. Works of art, intent on being works of art, have sallied forth in search of a beautiful phantom. They have lied. Even when they described the abject, the impoverished, the hopeless, they prettified the truth. Has anyone ever presented life as it is lived today without turning it into something it is not? Has anyone put into words the pointless and unspeakable banality of day-to-day living? The crucified sun? Infinity and finiteness? Fine words for such tawdry stories of love and lovelessness, for such pathetic failures, a way of not seeing and not saying, a way of avoiding, of magnifying, of dramatizing, of lying. And that is why it is right and proper for the symbol to continue its sorry career and to sink into the fetid abyss, disappearing for ever.’

That is the message of the crucified sun. But there is more:

‘No. Don’t listen to people who shrug their shoulders and smile, saying: “What a load of stupid, pathetic rubbish! You’re living in the
past with all that nineteenth-century stuff. We've left all that behind, things are different for us modern men!" Leave them to it. Don't you see that they're still dragging the same old ball and chain, that they're all tarred with the same old brush? Do you think their modernity can free itself from its origins and its original sins as easily as that? Do you think that it could possibly have destroyed its foundation, the source of its origin, its failures, and Christianity, and Stalinism? And as for talking seriously about love and its problems, take a good look. Surely you're not so naive as to believe that there are no longer any barriers between the eyes and the senses, between mind and body, between radiance and penumbra, between the admiration of beauty and the enjoyment of it? Take a good look. Do you imagine that it is any easier than it used to be to move from those sparkling eyes, those charming dresses, that silky hair, that cool, fragrant skin, that seductive appearance, that enchanting spectacle, to the act, to organs, to visceral penetration of that body, to the expectation of it, the demands of it? From her conscious thoughts to her hidden secrets? From her as subjective being and back again to her – and you – as objects of flesh and blood? What a labyrinth, from passion to passion via consciousness, signs, words. And the failures! Would the crucified sun be too brilliant, too humiliated to express all this? Would it do better to reserve its dramatizing for sordid little trivialities? No. Take no notice when people laugh at you or try to make you feel guilty. Once and for all, stop being naive. Stop listening to everything people say. Watch them living their lives, and try to capture what they are. Get rid of that insipid niceness, that overunderstanding – and semiunderstanding – way you have of looking and listening. Insipid and nice – that's your real failing, it comes from your overprotected childhood – too comfortable despite its boredom and unhappiness – from the silliness of youth and the indecisions of adolescence. Open your eyes to the terrible cruelty of what is called the modern age. You didn’t want that cruelty, did you? What were you trying to protect from it? Your optimism, your love of life, your hopes? No. You were trying to protect your own weakness. You were refusing to accept giving up, renunciation. You wanted to keep to your own paths, your own closed doors. Remember your favourite themes: the suit of armour, and the spaces through which the outside world gets in, the interstices through which emaciated freedom makes its escape. That's where you went wrong. And that was my message, me, the crucified sun. And I was, I still am worthy of this drama, even though people exploit me! Above all because people exploit me! By piling yet more filth on me, people are confirming my message, confirming what I am and what I have yet to say. Stand up again, child of the sun, scarred son, child of the
scarred sun! Enter into truth! Be proud again! Despite the triviality of all-too-familiar sorrows and precarious joys, and pleasures snatched at random, you always had within you an unflinching desire for the truth, a profound wish to forge a path for yourself, to shine, to radiate. When the capacity for bearing suffering and the ability to sustain joy became intertwined, it was a movement towards truth. Could you have been patient for so very, very long were it not for these moments of pleasure stolen here and there – sometimes stupidly, sometimes spitefully? Didn’t they help you to measure the slowness of time and history in terms of individual existence, to question it, to say “no” first to this, then to that?

‘Take a good look at people who try to dedramatize, to desymbolize and designify. They seem to think they can achieve complete demystification and reach things *per se*, in all their unadorned nakedness, revealing the aims and values which lie hidden beneath the mask. It’s pure platitude, too black and white. With no symbols, no fictions, how could you carry out the cruel dialogue between the I and the me, between living and life? How otherwise could this tale be told, with all its ellipses and silences? Without images or symbols, how could you condense the vapours of living, how could you trace man’s long journey into the dark recesses of his own memory? How could you conjure up the past, that zombie, how could you reanimate it in the name of what is possible, unless you call upon the power of images? If it is true that life as it is lived was always more shoddy and more lousy than could be expressed by a glorious and tragic symbol, at the same time it was always something much vaster. Music, for example. What does music make you become? Everything. Small worlds and the world at large. The universe. All moments, every one of them. Love, play, knowledge, calmness. An inexhaustible presence – time overflowing with presences – takes hold of you, sweeps you away and changes you by becoming your own presence and your own present, the present moment which – at last – you offer yourself as you enter the realm of everything possible. Everything: joy and suffering, serenity and pain, more and ever more. Inexhaustible depths: a translucent abyss unlike that of the sea (which swallows you up) and the sky (which fascinates you and drowns you in its luminous void). The purest, the simplest, the noblest, the lowliest, divine and demonic – this is what music makes you become. The distance between life and living is bridged. You are clothed in splendour, the splendour of totality. An illusion? Not entirely. Alienation? Maybe, but an alienation which disalienates you before it negates you once more. So do not hesitate to glorify yourself. The crucified sun has a meaning, even if that meaning does not have eternity on its side, for
nothing is eternal, except perhaps the law of the world: unlimited creative power, creating finitude and limits, inexhaustibly, finitude bearing the sign of infinity and leaving its mark on the infinite to which it no longer belongs. There is no life, and no consciousness, without separation, without externality, without distance – and without the bridging of distance, without the spanning of separation, without victory over externality. . . .
Dear, honoured, illustrious comrade,

First of all I should like to express my heartfelt thanks. I will be extremely honoured to make my modest contribution to the special number of your eminent publication celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the great October Revolution, the headlong rush to construct socialism and the irresistible — though gradual — flight towards the triumph of Communism.

When the events of October 1917 took place — events whose historical and global importance it would be impossible to overestimate — I was still a child. Yet from the very start it was as though I was driven by an impulse deeper than the class prejudices of my native background, and I came out on the side of the October Revolutionaries. Since then I have not changed. Of course, one must never say: I will never change. Nevertheless, I feel confident in insisting that I will never accept the arguments of people who cast doubt on the historical necessity and theoretical legitimacy of the great Revolution. I will not accept that the events of 1917 were caused by an accident of history and by what one might call a contingent necessity: the fact that your muzhiks had stopped wanting to fight for the Tsar, for example, or Lenin’s political genius.

Here in France, those of our intellectuals who have not yet been clearly and openly depoliticized tend to be critical of you. Though they love you Soviets dearly, they often feel obliged to say some extremely harsh things about you. They expected great things from you, they still do; too much, probably: everything. They are more demanding than the others. In their criticisms it is frequently impossible to separate what is valid from what is not, what is sincere from
what is malicious. It is not that they hate you. When I hear them complaining, I usually reply: ‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.’ It’s some kind of proverb I heard or read somewhere. Perhaps it even comes from Russia. But we have our proverbs too, you know, nice succulent peasanty ones, like yours.

Dear, illustrious comrade, maybe you will think that to use a popular and somewhat vulgar proverb to counter these criticisms lacks firmness, and that it would be more appropriate to protest vigorously: ‘But no! There’s nothing wrong with the baby. It’s a beautiful baby, because it’s ours! Why should we throw it out?’ I’m sorry, dear comrade, but the vigour and firmness we admire in you Soviet Marxists is something we are incapable of. Moreover, it would never be acceptable. You must realize that if I spoke in the way you sometimes seem to wish me to, if I deliberately threw all reticence to the winds in an attempt to appear an ideal friend, if I said that your painters are the best in the history of the world and that social realism has had its Leonardo da Vinci and its Balzac, certain people would have no hesitation in exclaiming: ‘Hell’s bells! And you said there was nothing wrong with the baby!’ And you ought to realize that the people who spoke like that would not inevitably be traitors, renegades, bourgeois lackeys and capitalist flunkeys. Over here even your greatest admirers are unable to hold the clear-cut vision you demand, they cannot be so partisan, so unswervingly ideological. We lack Party spirit, it’s true. But in our opinion propaganda which turns a blind eye to defects and mistakes ends up being counterproductive in the long run. It prevents us understanding your history and the progress you have made, because for many years – no, from the very beginning – your descriptions have presented it as something perfected and fully achieved.

But you have asked me to develop one particular point, so I will start by saying how great an influence the October Revolution has had on art, literature and culture in France. I am convinced that our French culture has been extremely responsive to and enriched by that influence, despite the ideological and political pressures of the bourgeoisie. I have no wish to get embroiled in dubious arguments about the independence, relative or not, of superstructures in relation to the mode of production and the dominant class. Nevertheless, I am convinced that without the October Revolution the entire course of modern art in France would have been different. Why? Because at the end of the First World War our country went through a profound crisis which made us receptive to all the ideas emerging from the Revolution; because French culture has a romantic tradition running parallel to the classicism adopted so long ago by the bourgeoisie; and
finally because, as you know, our powerful workers’ movement upheld these traditions and influences. In fact these influences have gone far beyond the spheres which are directly linked to political movements.

This may surprise you, but in that sense the Revolution influenced artists, writers and thinkers who were very distant from it, and this without some of them even realizing it. Even the most reactionary schools of thought were not immune, whether it was a question of benefiting from it or of taking a stand against you and against ourselves. To take such a stand is to meet us on our own ground.

Criticisms from the Left and from the Right engage in a bitter struggle on shared territory. I could name specific historians and art critics who are known as men of the Right and who would consider themselves as such, but whose work would be incomprehensible without reference to historical materialism, from which they borrow many ideas and arguments, translating them into their own language. In my view victory will go to thinkers who can introduce the newest, the most vital and the most profound arguments. In terms of culture, the final victory will not necessarily be won by the trend with the most violent and zealous polemics – not in our country, at any rate, where the ideological struggle is a struggle not against ghosts and ‘survivals’, but against real men and real deeds.

My own memories and personal experience do not permit me to go back to the very beginning and to follow this process from its birth in the post-First World War crisis. A student at the time, I was caught up in an immense ferment which was inspired – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly – by the October Revolution. All the arguments were antibourgeois and were treated in a hot-headed, virulent, very French way. This was not without its fruitful contradictions, which have subsequently been misunderstood. I am thinking particularly of Surrealism, Dadaism and a few other less-well-known movements whose negative aspects now seem outdated, but which criticized and challenged things as they existed in a profoundly effective way.

If these movements alone did not create ‘modernity’ in France, they certainly made a fundamental contribution to it. In my opinion, the amazing and extraordinary thing is that for more than thirty years the men of the Right have bent over backwards to absorb ‘modernity’, to capture and assimilate it. To a certain extent they have succeeded. How, and why? I must confess that I have not been able to come up with an answer. As for the thinking directly inspired by the October Revolution, Soviet culture and the world Communist movement, it resolutely kept this ‘modernity’ it had helped to create at arm’s length; instead, it tried to absorb the classical tradition and its art forms, which seemed quintessentially to belong to the bourgeoisie.
This muddle plunged us French into a virtually inextricable confusion. We wonder what this contradictory situation must look like to outside observers.

Dear comrade, this is the situation I would like to talk to you and your esteemed readers about, even though I regret that I must admit from the very start that I do not completely understand it.

I must also tell you that the influence of the October Revolution made itself felt in a certain cultural context. Via the Ballets Russes and the music of Stravinsky, Russian folklore (so culturally important for you in your country) became very widely known in France before the World War – the first one, that is. Like a cold mountain stream sometimes mixed with mud, this folklore swept away a whole host of archaic elements. For us, Stravinsky cannot be separated from that other enfant terrible of music, the violent, the lyrical, the ironic Prokofiev; together they dominate the Russian School of music, which leads the world (over here many people do not like your painters, although others have spoken eloquently in their defence). Art nègre, exoticisms, memories of the fabulous Orient and the Thousand and One Nights became mingled with evocations of Petrushka, the Rite of Spring and Scheherazade. We found it difficult to separate what was traditional from what had been invented. Wouldn’t you agree that there are periods when repressed forces, incapable of causing a political explosion, become fused by pressures from above and below so to speak, and then blast their way up from the depths through outmoded superstructures? I would certainly suggest that the indelible impression Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes have left in France stems from such a movement. I really believe that without them France would never have had any modern art or ‘modernity’. Picasso would probably not have existed, or would not have taken the path he took. Nor would music, nor theatre. Without the Ballets Russes, the influence of the Revolution would have been diminished.

Since your kind letter was so encouraging, I am tempted to open my mind to you completely. My thoughts on this matter stem from a long meditation on what I shall call ‘modernity’. I don’t know if you will find the term acceptable. Over here it has a meaning which is both painful and hesitant, and it seems to me that pain and hesitancy are indeed equally aspects of it. The birth of ‘modernity’ – over here, at any rate – coincided with the beginnings of doubt and questioning; the world we call modern was born with the shattering of the modern world, carrying within its heart the principle of its destruction and self-destruction. Modernism contained the seeds of its own crisis. Aspect number one, therefore: a period of great creativity. Aspect number two: hesitancy, doubt, decay and, if you like, corruption from
within. If you retain only this second aspect, you will be left with a one­sided view of our culture, our era, and 'modernity'.

The period I am talking about begins in France with the twentieth century and, more precisely, between the beginning of the century and the First World War: in and around 1905. What was happening then? The first great modern technological inventions – electricity, motorcars, aeroplanes – were entering into industrial and social practice. Those were also the first years of cinema, of advertising transformed by new means, of mechanical recordings of music and the human voice. Life was changing too, palpably and visibly. The very appearance of towns, of streets, of houses, was being modified. Life seemed to widen out; new and limitless horizons were opening. Images, symbols, signs and signals all merged in unforeseen ways with tactile reality, bringing it a new breadth and dimension; day-to-day reality combined with something ‘other’ than itself. From this explosive mixture were born original ideas about painting and sculpture, about music, about language. At the same time, we have the beginnings of imperialism and international tension; the great wars and the great class struggles are already looming. 1905 is also the year of the first revolution in Russia, the dress rehearsal for the October Revolution.

This creative period begins around 1905 under the impetus of danger and doubt, triumphalist, adventurous and racked by uncertainty. It ends twenty to twenty-five years later. It is at its height during the revolutionary crisis of the immediate postwar years. Some great names are associated with its ascendancy: Picasso, Apollinaire, etc.

Dear and eminent comrade, I will refrain from giving you a detailed history of this period of creativity. Suffice it to say that several currents and influences emerged from it in a fruitful confusion, now converging, now locked in mutual combat, in painting (Cubist, figurative, abstract, etc.) as well as in literature and elsewhere. As for philosophy, it was already well behind the times.

I will concentrate on literature. In France, two currents predominated.

The first current (in my opinion) cultivated style in living rather than the work of art per se. If it produced constructs, they were adjuncts to the search for style in living, characterized by conscious communication with the spontaneous forces of the image and of unconscious nature. I am sure you will recognize this as a description of Surrealism. One day I shall attempt an analysis which will reveal that Surrealism was a mixture of old cosmological ideas, a new revolutionary fervour, and the determination to achieve total freedom and the total life. Such strange bedfellows gave birth to an inner contradiction which was to lead to the movement’s demise. Surrealism carried within itself the
seeds of its own destruction, its own self-destruction. These were present from the start via Dadaism, which denied art, literature, and even the validity of language itself.

The second current subordinated life to the work of art. It kept intact the idea of art, poetic creation and the will to create. In my view the most eminent representative of this second current was Max Jacob (who was murdered by the Nazis in 1944). Max Jacob was no less of a revolutionary than the Surrealists. The Surrealists were always devising ways of scandalizing the bourgeoisie, while Jacob, for his part, wrote a very satirical *Tableau de la bourgeoisie*. But I freely admit that this effort, too, carried the seeds of its own destruction. To sustain the determination to create in an aesthetic way, a certain ideology was required – it still is, you know. Or rather, a form of imagination and fiction is required, and symbols, if not myths. Max Jacob looked for symbolisms in the old Jewish and Christian traditions: the cabbala, astrology and mystical theology. For him it was nothing more than raw material for his art, but how awkward and compromising it was! But that is not a reason for forgetting him completely...

In my opinion, therefore, the great period came to an end between 1925 and 1930. Would I go so far as to say that since then we have all lived off this period, consuming the things it created? Perhaps. Personally, all I saw at close quarters was its final blaze of glory. Towards 1925 capitalism became stabilized (provisionally, but durably, as you know). Immediately, the climate in art and culture began to change. After a few final convulsive somersaults the Surrealists were to become men of literature just like anyone else; some succeeded, some fell silent, some committed suicide. Max Jacob, the alternative voice of poetry, withdrew, defeated, to a monastery. Then something happened which certain up-and-coming writers regarded as miraculous: it became fashionable to be *maudit*.

Dear comrade, it seems to me that this retrospective is not appropriate simply for France. For it was during the same period that Mayakovsky began to emerge from among the pleiad of poets in your country. Of Mayakovsky I would say that he was able to bring together the search for a lifestyle, like our Futurists and Surrealists, and experiments in literary style and its conditions, like the opposite school represented by Max Jacob. As for the revolutionary innovations in cinema (which were to turn it into a great art form) – we all know where they sprang from. Eisenstein was able to shatter photographic realism, treating images not as mere reflections of objects but as the raw material for the world of art; through montage he achieved a reality which was more profound than immediate reality, making room in his images for the imaginary, for fiction, for emotion, for thought.
In your country, at the same time as in ours, there were great painters who were able to understand the interaction I spoke about between images, symbols, signs, abstractions and tactile reality: Kandinsky and Chagall, for example. They saw this interaction differently from Picasso or Braque, but just as effectively.

In this brief summary we should not forget that the same period was equally creative in Germany. For this was when Gropius and the Bauhaus were working in parallel with Le Corbusier, inventing new elements for modern architecture and urbanism. Schoenberg was dismantling the monolithic structures of classical harmony; and regardless of whether we like the twelve-tone scale or not, we must admit that it was a revolutionary direction for music to take. And was not the ferment which followed the tragic failure of the revolution in Germany also responsible for the theatre of Brecht and his sardonic theory of the alienation effect, which Max Jacob had also formulated? Through some strange misunderstanding, Brecht was discovered by the French very late in the day. By the time his dramatic genius had reached its peak, France had already left the period of creative ferment far behind. A completely different period was beginning, with unforeseen characteristics. On the one hand, most of the writers and artists of the previous period – the great period – were to continue their careers, becoming famous and successful, exploiting the innovations of ‘modernity’ until they were milked dry. A certain stagnation in all areas was about to set in. On the other hand, certain new preoccupations began to emerge, linked in particular to the growing influence of technology and technicity on culture and on art. The growth of technicity may leave culture unaffected, or it may pave the way for an original technological culture. In either case, dear comrade, I cannot hide the fact that I am filled with misgivings about the future of art, both in France and elsewhere.

Dear comrade, I feel that these arguments will be clearer if I list them systematically. The mania for being systematic comes from my being a philosopher, and I hope you will excuse it.

(1) What we call ‘modern’ art, including poetry and literature, rejected the aesthetic of imitation which had prevailed for many centuries, and took this rejection as far as it could go. Its desire was to create. Its desire was to be creativity. And this was because reality was being transformed before our very eyes, thanks to the effectiveness of technology. Abstraction and physical sensation, signs and reality, nature and culture, were all mixed together (and were not without their conflicts). Art could not imitate nature, nor could it reproduce beauty conceived as an ideal existing prior to the work of art. Men did
not imitate, they created. How could an artist not want to be absolutely creative?

(2) Modern art wanted to create. But what? A ‘world’ of art. So it devoted itself to abstraction divorced from reality – in other words to signs and combinations of signs divorced from things, or conversely to things stripped of their symbols and significations, things per se. It wanted to create this ‘world’ concretely and to determine it practically, and occasionally it managed to do so, designating it in an immediate, tactile way.

(3) It was with the birth of ‘modernity’ and in the context of technological, economic, social and political change (thus in the context of the crisis of the society we French call ‘modern’) that ‘modern’ art became conscious of itself as a desire to be creative. Its period of creativity lasted for twenty-five brief, passionate years. From the beginning it carried the seeds of its own demise.

(4) The problem of creativity and the goal of creativity implied two further problems. These were, first, the problems of the work of art itself, the conditions for producing it and for sustaining the determination to create (problems of ideology, symbolism, images, imagination, and of their relation with the ‘real’ and the ‘lived’); and second, the problem of lifestyle and of this style’s relation to the work of art itself. These two problems were probably one and the same, but they were separated, and any solutions proposed were one-sided, and thus limited. This in turn produced another issue, that of supersession.

(5) With ‘modernity’ art ceased to be a social content experienced by an individual and subsequently projected outwards to become a many-sided activity; it became a vocation and a profession, a way of life, a means of communication, the application of techniques, ‘making’, gambling, risking, the search for the most effective way to communicate, by ‘making’ and ‘saying’.

(6) Over here in the capitalist countries, something curious and ambiguous began to mediate between aesthetic creation (or the determination to be creative) and the search for a lifestyle: let us call it aestheticism. This was a concoction made up of ideology, incomplete communication and ‘making’ interpreted from outside, all more or less skilfully mixed in with ‘lived’ experience. In the main, this simply gave it the illusory appearance of a style. This aestheticism has resulted in a plethora of confusions and counterconfusions. The sincere and rigorous pursuit of style can end up leading the artist astray with his own success, or killing him off through the lack of it. The search for authenticity and sincerity becomes a theatrical gesture. The techniques for producing a construct become means for providing verbal and sensory stimulation. The work of art itself rarely sees
the light of day, and when it does it is some gigantic production littered with so-called aesthetic objects (as opposed to technical objects). In a word, aestheticism contains a strange alienation. It poses a threat to the very foundations of art by pushing it to crisis point. And the crisis deepens. But it is also impossible to imagine what would happen if this aestheticism were rejected, or if it simply disappeared.

Dear comrade, that is what I would like my article to be about. I could illustrate it with examples from my own experience and memories (from a certain date onwards: about 1925). That was the year I was fortunate enough to meet — all too briefly — your great Mayakovsky, and also Sergei Esenin. What poets they were! Meeting them was a highly important event in my life. Above all, I remember Sergei Esenin reciting a poem which I could barely understand; but it moved me to tears. His friend, Isadora Duncan, whom I also knew, was to die a few days later in an accident, and shortly after that Esenin committed suicide.

One of the things I would like to talk about in my article would be the first showing in Paris of Battleship Potemkin. It was in private, virtually in secret. And I would also like to recall the extraordinary impression the Soviet Pavilion made at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1927. Its daring geometrical forms provoked enormous interest in France. It scandalized the bourgeoisie, they were terrified by it. For young people searching for the way ahead, like me, it firmly instilled in us the idea that abstract art broke with bourgeois traditions and was synonymous with cultural revolution. Did you know that this Pavilion was dismantled and reconstructed at the headquarters of the CGT, where for a long time Paris workers were able to look at it and even go into it, as some offices had been installed inside? Later the Workers' University was set up there. Why should such great memories be forgotten?

And while I am on the subject, please allow me to say, dear and illustrious comrade, that I would like to start a dialogue with you, and that we should begin exchanging letters on a regular basis. I could ask you the same questions as I ask myself, and your replies could be published in one of the many French periodicals which would be pleased to make their pages available to you. How do you Soviet Marxists view the cultural situation in France? I freely admit — and I don't care who knows it — that I cannot see the situation at all clearly. Among Marxists or theorists influenced by Marxism, there are those who insist that over here more or less everything must be understood in terms of the decline of capitalism, the dominance and decay of the bourgeoisie, and the influence of imperialism on the masses (need I add: everything except a directly proletarian art and
Science, immediately linked to the actions of the working class and the life of the Party). Conversely, there are others who maintain that over here everything is expressing or ‘reflecting’ a transition to socialism, a social transformation which is urgently and vitally necessary. Which of them is right? The first group strikes me as being sectarian; the second I find opportunistic. I cannot decide which side to take, and the problem is compounded by the fact that the spokesmen for the two attitudes are sometimes the same men, talking in different registers for different occasions.

The proposed plan for my article may strike you as paradoxical. It certainly is for me, but I find that unavoidable. Whatever reservations we may formulate about ‘modernity’, whatever criticisms we may make of so-called modern art, abstract painting, so-called concrete music, the so-called *nouveau roman* and *nouvelle vague*, we cannot forget that ‘we’ are producing these forms. If it is imperative to make a critique of ‘modernity’ and to supersede it, modernity must be our starting point, and we must accept it as such. But how should we proceed? By empirical observation, or by a critique which isolates men and their constructs, and judges them impressionistically? Both are unsatisfactory. ‘We’ French militants of the Left have watched the Right commandeer these modern forms, while our best comrades have turned towards a kind of neoclassicism, writing sonnets, composing cantatas, painting anecdotal or historical canvases. It is all very worrying.

It is a difficult thing to admit, but I have never properly understood how ‘Proletkult’, abstract art and the brutal break with populism came about. Would you happen to have a good book on contemporary history which maps these processes out and explains the reasons behind these decisions? If you could send it to me, I would enjoy reading it and getting it translated. Over here the shifts in cultural orientation were imposed suddenly as a direct result of organizational policy. Policies had changed, and this change made itself felt on the level of culture and art. In other words, change on the level of culture and art signified changes in policy. No one was particularly interested in men as such, or in whether or not their works of art were valid or sterile. For example, I can remember as if it were only yesterday the morning I learned that the AEAR (the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers) had been disbanded, and that it was to be replaced by a ‘*Maison de la culture*’. Taken almost twenty-five years ago, this important decision heralded the birth of the Popular Front and was the result of a new political situation. Now the AEAR had initiated a wide-ranging discussion between ‘figurative’ and ‘abstract’ painters. It was certainly a long-winded affair. If my memory serves me
well, the 'abstracts' maintained that they were more revolutionary, or even that they were the only revolutionaries, and they rejected the 'figuratives' as old hat. With the changes in policy, the 'figuratives' gradually took up the offensive again, and finally the 'abstracts' were defeated. I admit that I never really understood how these changes in policy and aesthetics were related. Was it a question of adapting to reality? Was it a concession? Was it sudden progress? Tactics? An underlying necessity? In any event, the confusion it produced has never been fully clarified. Since then, our socialist realist writers and artists have seen the light. They have sung of married bliss, family values, work well done, devotion – all the virtues bourgeois writers no longer dared to advocate for fear of appearing totally ridiculous. They have wallowed joyfully and drunkenly in virtue, as if they were trying to prove to the bourgeoisie that we are more moral and more traditional than they are. We have become preachers – in other words, bores – yet we have retained our bad reputation. I am talking about the capitalist countries, you understand. There is a great deal still to be said about all this. To sum up: around 1930 – or, more precisely, between 1930 and 1934 – something happened on the cultural level. This something echoed – or rather, 'reflected', as you say, and as we say sometimes – something else which was happening on the political level. What? The failure of the revolution in Germany, and thus momentarily in Western Europe as a whole? The shift to the defence of democracy? But in that case it was not the decisive step forward that it has been painted, but a step backwards, at least partially. Could these cultural changes have been a reflection of the growth of socialism in the Soviet Union? The shift from a narrow perspective on class or people to a national perspective? But why did this growth take the cultural form it did, and why was it imposed on us the way it was? None of these repercussions has been clearly explained. And we cannot understand why they should be irreversible. After all, surely autocritique is a way of turning back the clock when mistakes have been made and when things have gone too far. Obviously, obviously, history can never move into reverse; time has an objective existence; it is irreversible, and necessity has a meaning. Yet to refuse to accept that anything might be irreparable is a way of admitting that men come first. If everything that happened was irreversible and irreparable, no one would ever be cured of an illness, no madman would ever become sane; critique and autocritique would have no validity. Sometimes I hear people say that the criterion of civilization and humanism is that every individual who has failed in something should be allowed to have a second chance: to get divorced after a bad marriage and get married again, to learn a new trade, to get well again,
etc.

Is it reactionary to believe this? Excuse me, dear comrade, if I sound as if I’m pontificating. As a Marxist, I believe that human beings should not limit their activities to the mastery of space and the material world, but should struggle against the freezing of time, against everything finished, against everything which seems irreversible and irreparable. I believe that human beings should not simply appropriate matter and the material world, but that they can and must take control of their own nature. Obviously, we will never bring the dead back to life, and energy wasted is energy lost for ever. But the least we can do is to revitalize the ideas for which many of the dead lived their lives.

I am getting a little bogged down with all these details, and there are plenty of other people who could explain them to you better than I can. But to end this letter, dear comrade, I would like to tell you a story which no one else knows. It is about an old friend of mine called Joseph Dupont. He was twenty years older than me, but he died young, when I was still a boy; and sadly, at the time, I was not sufficiently mature really to appreciate how brilliant he was.

He was a carpenter’s son. As soon as he went to primary school, his teacher noticed that he was extremely gifted at drawing, and gave him extra lessons. This teacher had taste, and was a decent sort: he was a man of the Left. He showed young Joseph only paintings which exhibited a healthy realism and an irreproachable patriotism: Meissonnier, Edouard Detaille, Bonnat. At the age of twelve, Joseph spent his playtimes illustrating Zola novels. At fifteen, he went on his tour of France; it was still a tradition then. He did lightning pen or pencil sketches of fat bourgeois on café terraces or in fashionable meeting-places. He told me that more than once the portraits he did for the odd coin or two would steer close to caricature. He always roared with laughter when he recalled one particular young woman, obviously flighty, who gave him a kiss and a thousand francs (a considerable sum of money at that time) for a drawing which conspicuously transformed her husband into a rustic ruminant.

All Joseph Dupont wanted was to be a painter. He finally got to Paris, and even attended classes at an academy. He reacted against the official style which was taught there. He was offered jobs which would have enabled him to continue his studies, but he turned them down. He returned home and settled down in a small town near the village where he was born, which is where I was born as well. And there, for ten years, with all the energy of a wild animal, he painted. He earned his living drawing plans for cabinet-makers or cartoons for the local paper. A loaf of bread, the occasional glass of wine, and he was satisfied. He was a painter. What did he paint? Everything. Great men and
great scenes from history – our national history – and from revolu­tions: Robespierre, Vercingetorix, Lenin, Vauban, Boudienny, Duguesclin, and many others whose names escape me.

His attic became crammed full of canvases. What bourgeois would have bought those wonderful and passionately realist paintings? Not one. They were not decadent or titillating enough. Joseph Dupont was not one to reject the world of things and objects. He did not dis­solve them on his canvas in a chaos of shapeless blots or in desiccated, colourless shapes. No. His faces would not be tortured and disfig­ured. They would not have two noses, or lopsided eyes. He painted what he saw, how he saw it. He did not substitute signs for reality; he did not subject reality to ignominious insults; yet he was not a Naïf, like poor Douanier Rousseau, who had to die before he could become famous; he would not have left his own country, like Gauguin; nor would he have painted under foreign skies, like Van Gogh. He was totally French, and what he painted was unlike anything here – unlike the Impressionists, the Fauves, the Cubists, those vandals of idealism and decrepitude. What he painted was like – what he painted.

And they never forgave him for it. I became his only confidant. Once he offered the county museum one of his vast progressivist fres­cos which he had dedicated to the glory of French technology, science and industry: it depicted Denis Papin discovering that steam could lift the lid of his saucepan, and realizing that this energy would revolu­tionize the world. Anyone could see that the entire painting was imbued with the idea of historical necessity, and the genius of Papin’s mind was visible in the inspired expression on his face, marvellously captured by the brush, in trompe-l’œil. The painting was refused. Whenever Joseph told me this story he would smile, for his moral standards were as elevated as his creative genius.

I helped carry the painting up to the attic. I was in tears, but not he.

Shortly afterwards, I had to go away for a long time as part of my studies. The only valid reason for leaving one’s own country is to visit the great socialist fatherland! On my return, Joseph was dead. He died without a sou, and was given a pauper’s grave. His landlord repossessed his house, and gave the entire contents of the attic to a rag-and-bone man. Like the blind instrument of a vandalistic fate, the rag-and-bone man simply made a bonfire with all the canvases and sold the frames to a furniture merchant. All I found were a few unrec­ognizable fragments which the rag-and-bone man’s young daughters had cut up with scissors, for fun.

Of Joseph, nothing remained. The bourgeoisie had won a terrify­ing victory. I alone cherish the memory of this victim. Dear comrade,
could you possibly send a delegation to visit the places where he lived out his life? Ought there not to be a monument to the unknown painter, as there is to the unknown soldier? If you came with the delegation, I would enjoy discussing all this with you in more detail, and I could tell you more about our art, our aesthetics, our problems and our uncertainties. . . .

Yours Very Sincerely,

(This letter remained unanswered.)
A few kilometres away from the tower blocks of the new town lies the sleepy old village where I live. Just a few minutes from my timeworn house, and I am surrounded by the derricks of a building estate without a past.

N. is medieval, but not obviously so (it was built to a fairly regular plan in the fourteenth century, by a bridge over the Gave on the road from Le Puy to Santiago de Compostela, and on the site of a much older hamlet; in its time it was a new town, and an even newer one two centuries later when it was rebuilt on an even more geometric groundplan, and ringed with Italianate ramparts). I know every stone of Navarrenx. In these stones I can read the centuries, rather as botanists can tell the age of a tree by the number of rings in its trunk. But for Navarrenx—as for many other places, villages and towns—a different analogy springs to mind: the image of the seashell. A living creature has slowly secreted a structure; take this living creature in isolation, separate it from the form it has given itself according to the laws of its species, and you are left with something soft, slimy and shapeless; what can it possibly have in common with this delicate structure, its ridges, its grooves, its symmetries, its every detail revealing smaller, more delicate details as you examine it more closely? But it is precisely this link, between the animal and its shell, that one must try to understand. It summarizes the immense life of an entire species, and the immense effort this life has made to stay alive and to maintain its own characteristics. History and civilization in a seashell, this town embodies the forms and actions of a thousand-year-old community which was itself part of a wider society and culture, ever more distant from us as the years pass by. This community has shaped its shell, building and rebuilding it, modifying it again and again according to its needs. Look closely, and within every house you will see the slow, mucous trace of this animal which transforms the chalk in the soil around it into something delicate and structured: a family. Every house has its own particular face. It is amazing the diversity which can
be obtained spontaneously from the same unchanging (or ‘structural’) regional elements, like the gallery used for drying corn cobs which also served as a passageway from room to room, or the big covered entrance for the carts on their way to the barns where corn and barley were threshed with a flail. On the inside and the outside of these old houses the functionally practical and the ornamentally superfluous live side by side in a matter-of-fact way, often (but not always) attractive, as charming as they are understated. The word ‘charm’ suits them better than ‘beauty’ or ‘style’, even if they indubitably express a certain taste and lifestyle. Vividly coloured roughcast adorns each dwelling; it protects the walls from the weather, as well as offering a traditional protection against evil spirits. Each village is a construct in its own right, and so is each house. Everything about them forms a kind of unity: goals, functions, forms, pleasures, activities. Although the different neighbourhoods in N. have their own vague sort of individuality (around the cattle market, around the church and in the outskirts beyond the walls), none of them has a separate identity; there are no residential areas separated from the places where people work or enjoy themselves (sometimes). There is no clear-cut difference, yet no confusion between the countryside, the streets and the houses; you walk from the fields into the heart of the town and the buildings, through an uninterrupted chain of trees, gardens, gateways, courtyards and animals. In the town, the street is not a wasteland, nor is it the only place where – for good or ill – things happen. It is not the only human place. Spontaneous and transitional, it is not simply there so that people can get from A to B, nor does it lay traps for them with lighting effects and displays of objects. It is a place to stroll, to chinwag, to be alive in. Nothing can happen in the street without it being noticed from inside the houses, and to sit watching at the window is a legitimate pleasure. But the passers-by get their own back by staring down the corridors and into the courtyards. The street is not an overprivileged means of communication, but neither has ill fortune emasculated it. The street is something integrated. Listen to the song of the craftsmen and their hammers, listen to the shrilling of the carpenters’ planes and the children crying and the mothers scolding. There may be nicer and more picturesque places, but there were not many – in times gone by – which were more evenly balanced. They were never without their hidden conflicts, but that is another story.

But none of this really obtains any more. This small town, with its craftsmen and shopkeepers, in its well-established context of peasantry and countryside, is vegetating and emptying, like so many other dying villages and towns. The expiring seashell lies shattered and
open to the skies. The surviving shopkeepers are little more than managers. The craftsmen? You could count them on the fingers of one hand. Market day has been the same since the fourteenth century, but the market itself is tiny compared with what it used to be. The street is filled with cars and lorries; it is getting more and more noisy, more and more like a wasteland. N. is boring, like everywhere else is boring, and more and more so. It always was boring, but in times gone by that boredom had something soft and cosy about it, like Sundays with the family, comforting and carefree. There was always something to talk about, always something to do. Life was lived in slow motion, life was lived there. Now it is just boring, the pure essence of boredom.

Whenever I step foot in Mourenx I am filled with dread. Yet the new town has a lot going for it. The overall plan (the master blueprint) has a certain attractiveness: the lines of the tower blocks alternate horizontals and verticals. The break between the landscape – wooded hills, moorland, vineyards – and the city may be rather abrupt, but it is bearable; it is relatively easy on the eye. The blocks of flats look well planned and properly built; we know that they are very inexpensive, and offer their residents bathrooms or showers, drying rooms, well-lit accommodation where they can sit with their radios and television sets and contemplate the world from the comfort of their own homes. . . Over here, state capitalism does things rather well. Our technicists and technocrats have their hearts in the right place, even if it is what they have in their minds which is given priority. It is difficult to see where or how state socialism could do any differently and any better.

Yet every time I see these ‘machines for living in’ I feel terrified. When the technologues and ‘mechanologues’ of today describe the latest machines, they present them as being less inert and closed-off than perhaps we had thought. They are supposedly less fragmenting for work; they constitute a ‘milieu’ with an existence and life of its own, and act as a mediator between nature and human beings, both as individuals and as groups. Such descriptions are of the greatest interest. When they review the question of machines, it is in the light of the most recent developments in science and technology. But if proof for what they say is to be found, it is not here in Mourenx but a short walk away, in the dazzling and gigantic factory at Lacq. Here in Mourenx, what do I see? These blocks of flats are also ‘technological objects’ and machines. Will they be able to provide a new humanism? Are they already providing it? Can they mediate between man and nature, between one man and another? Are they bringing individuals, families and groups together, or are they forcing them apart? Will
people be compliant and do what the plan expects them to do, shopping in the shopping centre, asking for advice at the advice bureau, doing everything the civic centre offices demand of them like good, reliable citizens? (We should not overlook the fact that as yet these centres exist only on paper, and of course they can only be an improvement – as and when they materialize!) Can spontaneity be revitalized here, can a community be created? Is the functional being integrated into an organic reality – a life – in a way which will give that reality a structure it will be able to modify and adapt? As yet I cannot give a firm answer. The hypothesis is plausible, and it produces a whole new string of questions. Here, in Mourenx, what are we on the threshold of? Socialism or supercapitalism? Are we entering the city of joy or the world of unredeemable boredom?

Mourenx has taught me many things. Here, objects wear their social credentials: their function. Every object has its use, and declares it. Every object has a distinct and specific function. In the best diagnosis, when the new town has been successfully completed, everything in it will be functional, and every object in it will have a specific function: its own. Every object indicates what this function is, signifying it, proclaiming it to the neighbourhood. It repeats itself endlessly. When an object is reduced to nothing but its own function, it is also reduced to signifying itself and nothing else; there is virtually no difference between it and a signal, and to all intents and purposes a group of these objects becomes a signalling system. As yet there are not many traffic lights in Mourenx. But in a sense the place is already nothing but traffic lights: do this, don’t do that. When objects are reduced to the basic level of a signifier they become indistinguishable from things *per se*, they are left naked, stripped bare, robbed of meaning. With signals as with signs (in language), the final element which signifiers adhere to and separate from is a basic fact, a thing: the red light, the phoneme. Here nothing noticeable happens (or apparently not). Only one event is possible: total explosion, total collapse. To put it in terms of information theory: everything is almost a hundred per cent redundant. Everything is clear and intelligible. Everything is trivial. Everything is closure and materialized system. The text of the town is totally legible, as impoverished as it is clear, despite the architects’ efforts to vary the lines. Surprise? Possibilities? From this place, which should have been the home of all that is possible, they have vanished without trace.

In Mourenx, modernity opens its pages to me. It is just like a ‘novel of objects’ (no, I must ask contemporary novelists to excuse me, that is not right – I mean just like a propaganda leaflet). Here I cannot read the centuries, not time, nor the past, nor what is possible. Instead
I read the fears modernity can arouse: the abstraction which rides roughshod over everyday life – the debilitating analysis which divides, cuts up, separates – the illusory synthesis which has lost all ability to reconstruct anything active – the fossilized structures, powerless to produce or reproduce anything living, but still capable of suppressing it – the father figures who feel they have to be cruel to be kind: the state, the police, the Church, God (and the absence of God), the gendarmerie, caretakers, offices and bureaucracy, organization (and lack of organization), politics (and all its shortcomings).

The bourgeoisie had an indisputable genius for analysis and analytical reasoning, the evil genius of abstraction and separation. It still has it – or at least, its most intelligent members, the technocrats, still have it. The bourgeoisie did not create this genius (it was born with the beginnings of logic), nor have they exhausted it. It has survived them. For all we know, socialism will have to undergo the same process. To use ‘class perspective’ to deny this would be one-sided, and grossly partisan. Syntheses, totalities, the total man, supersessions – all have been sadly lacking; the only course open to us is to wait patiently for a higher unity to emerge. As for the bourgeoisie, it adopted analytical reasoning and made it its own specific mentality. With all its effectiveness, theoretical and practical, material and non-material, the bourgeois mentality has dismembered everything which had hitherto been organically united: nature and the social man, being and thought, work, actions, activities, generations, ideas, feelings, functions, forms. Nowadays it is even dislocating words and discourse, the elements of discourse, ‘structures’. It has taken the technical division of labour to such extremes that it seems that the rediscovery of unity and totality must be just around the corner, so intolerable is the sense of separation.

From this perspective the bourgeois era was characterized by a colossal analysis – indispensable, effective, terrifying – which has been turned into objective reality and projected on to the new towns. Everything which could be has been separated and differentiated: not only specific spheres and types of behaviour, but also places and people. All those things which have made up the interwoven texture of the spontaneous places of social living since the neolithic village have been hurled one by one into time and space. Consequently, the intermediaries between these disjointed elements (when there are any, which is always a good thing: means of communication, streets and roads, signals and codes, commercial agents, etc.) take on an exaggerated importance. The links become more important than the ‘beings’ who are being linked. But in no way does this importance endow these intermediaries with active life. Streets and highways are
becoming more necessary, but their incessant, unchanging, ever-repeated traffic is turning them into wastelands. Retail is becoming more important than production, exchange more important than activity, intermediaries more important than makers, means more important than ends. And everything is subsiding into boredom.

This is not the result of some demonic intervention or the consequence of bourgeois stupidity alone. A more objective necessity is in operation. Maybe it was necessary to push distance and separation to their utmost limits. Knowledge and action can function effectively only on distinct and separate elements. Analysis must be taken to its logical conclusion – which entails the death and dismemberment of what is being analysed – before thinking and living can be reunited. For praxis to become whole again, it has to have been fragmented and disjointed. Finally, in the course of man’s increasing control over nature – in economic and social development – there comes a moment when all the forces begin growing for themselves, almost as though they were autonomous: technology, demography, art, science, etc. Everything becomes disjointed, yet everything becomes a totality. Everything becomes reified, yet everything starts disintegrating. The aleatory is triumphant.

These are paradoxes. We are offered the ‘world’ as though it were a Meccano set, broken up into thousands of little ‘worlds’. At the same time, this dislocation – which is undermining the very foundations of praxis, of consciousness, of activity – is underpinned by an increasingly vigorous integration. On this vast field of human fragments, the state has built its watchtower. Society is becoming increasingly socialized, at a time when socialism has failed to offer any convincing solutions to the problems left hanging in midair by bourgeois society – except for one, which no longer concerns us directly: the problem of accumulation and economic growth without internal checks. This may guarantee the victory of socialism in the long term, but it still leaves us with all the other questions unanswered.

One of these aspects constantly makes us forget the other. On the one hand, the tendency towards totalization and ‘integration’ (in the social system as a whole – in other words, in the state) prevents us from seeing how disjointed everything is becoming. On the other hand, the fragmentation of everyday life is now much more extensive than the fragmentation of labour (something which may disappear in the not-too-distant future), and it prevents us from realizing that unification is being imposed from above, and that all original differences are being eliminated. The truth is to be found in the movement of totalization and fragmentation taken as a whole. This is the truth we read in that obscure and legible text: the new town.
When I come to Mourenx by road, I always climb a small hill which overlooks the brand-new housing estate, where the water tower is being built. As an intellectual of the Left and a philosopher (or ex-philosopher), I am not afraid of looking ridiculous; it is obvious that any gentleman who sits on a hilltop to meditate on the destiny of the housing estate below is perfectly ridiculous – or almost. And here are the things I have told myself so many times during my hilltop meditation:

'It is impossible for you not to be reminded here of what Marx wrote when he was still a young man: "Big industry . . . took from the division of labour the last semblance of its natural character. It destroyed natural growth in general, . . . and resolved all natural relationships into money relationships. In place of naturally grown towns it created the modern, large industrial cities which have sprung up overnight."' So think back to the medieval towns, swarming with activities and natural life. Nothing was disjointed, and everything opened out on to everything else: work and passing-through places, house and street, countryside and buildings, exchange and production, private life and public life. There, as Marx said, the life of the people and the life of the state coincided. It was democracy, it was lack of freedom – vitality and poverty, splendour and derision. You have seen something like it in the medinas of Islam. There is still a trace of it in the village where you live.

'Above all, think of the polycentric cities of Greece. The agora, the temple and the stadium regulated not only the way the inhabitants moved about, but also their interests and their passions, in an organic way. The way the city was structured coincided almost entirely with its way of life. Passions and rhythms, cycles in time and space – all was in harmony. There, the feeling of personal dignity and freedom was a part of social living. Civil society – in other words, the overall system of social relations which constituted men as individuals – was in harmony with the state, in so far as there was a state. The state coincided with the city and civil society to form a whole, and private life was subservient to it.

'Here, up until now, in comparable towns, everything has failed. You have seen the proof for yourself. You have seen the people who live in the new town, you have spoken to them. You call yourself a sociologist, but you haven’t even come up with any useful concepts for understanding them. Of what relevance to them are theories on adaptation and non-adaptation? For them, to adapt means being forced into a pre-existing context which has been built without them in mind. It means ceasing to exist. And not adapting is like suffering a vague, nagging pain. No doubt this is what they have chosen (is 'choose' really the right word?): protest and pain. That is their way of
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adapting. There they are. When they arrived, they were hoping for a radiant life. They thought the new estate would be like a holiday camp. That was what they had been promised. Then came the shock. The initial disappointment may lose its edge, but it is as tenacious as the scar left by a deep wound. People are only too aware of the shortcomings of this society to which they do not belong. And despite being keenly conscious of this, their everyday life becomes gradually numb. They sink into the stupor of indifference. The day will come when they will insist that they are satisfied. What will that insistence conceal? What can life really be like for the couples who live in this town knowing that it cannot last more than twenty to twenty-five years, since its energy sources are dwindling? One thing this means is that they have no hope of growing old with their children close at hand.

'Don't forget that many of them have already been transplanted at least once before. Most of them have already been uprooted. Their happiness and their solace is also the bane of their lives: children. Shortly you will go to see some people you know in that tower block down there. You will ask them if the noise the kids make is as unbearable as ever. Just a minute, that would be a useful statistic: the threshold beyond which the number of kids per floor makes life unbearable. Just the sort of thing a good, honest sociologist should be working on. The trouble with you is that you're too concerned with large-scale ideas. What is surprising here is that everything is disjointed, and yet all these separated people are governed by a strict hierarchy. As soon as they get together the hierarchy comes to the fore, fiercely, furiously, through pride. In each building and tower block, everyone is like everyone else, everyone is the same; so everyone does all they can to be different from everyone else. It becomes enormously important to boost one's pride and prestige no matter how petty the means. Pride is poisoning life.

'Before, elsewhere, everyday life existed. It was alive. The slimy creature secreted its beautiful shell. Everyday life was apparent only through its metamorphoses: art, culture, monuments, or quite simply discourse, a naive rhetoric, symbols. Yet it existed, with its dual dimension of platitude and profundity. You used to think that an autocritique of everyday life through its own transpositions was possible: a critique of the slimy animal by its delicate shell and vice versa – a critique of the everyday by festivals, or of trivial instants by moments, and vice versa – a critique of life by art and of art by life, of the real by its double and its reverse image: dreams, imagination, fiction. Then times changed. Technology began penetrating everyday life; there were new problems. And now, what can you see? Everyday life like a massive weight, reduced to its essence, to its trivial functions, and at
the same time almost disintegrated, nothing but fragmented gestures and repeated actions. There it is at your feet, almost entirely alienated and reified, and maybe willingly so, but perhaps also trying to take control again. And you say (as Marx did, but how bitter and uncertain the 'must' is!) we must strip human life of everything natural and define it as pure power over nature, so that finally men will come together and reunite to discover their own nature and join forces with external nature once more. Here in Mourenx this stripping process has been accomplished. So what now? What is to be done with this human sand, in which individuals and their gestures are stuck together in implacable, abstract blocks and dumped on the edge of the moors which have not changed at all, not far from ancestral villages, like a brand-new knife blade piercing the ancient soil? Our task now is to construct everyday life, to produce it, consciously to create it. There it is, in all its crushing boredom, a single, monolithic platitude. Yet it is not there any more, it has been reduced to a thin, opaque human material deprived of its games and spontaneous pleasures. . . . Will you try to find the crack for freedom to slip through, silently filling up the empty spaces, sliding through the interstices? Good old freedom, you know it well. It needs a "world", neither a completely empty one nor a completely full one. But what about that "world" down there? It looks empty, yet it looks full, "as full as an egg and as empty as an abyss . . . ". So it really is a question of creating things over again. It is obvious that working-class towns and proletarian neighbourhoods must be rebuilt. You might even go so far as to call for a dictatorship by the proletariat which would transform all the old slums into new towns. But in the end, what would that solve? The proof is there at your feet. Socialism cannot work magic, even if for many people the word has magic powers. Socialism has to find its own style too. As for you, what right have you to set yourself up as a specialist and an expert in ennui? Because that's what you seem to be doing. Like a gourmet at a wine-tasting, you sample different varieties of boredom. The boredom of Nav. has kept its aroma of things gone by – good things, often beautiful things. It smells of the land. The passing years have tarnished its splendours, but the bouquet lingers on. It is a modest and often complacent boredom, the boredom of long winter nights and summer Sundays. Here, in the new town, boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealized possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away. It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar. This is the realm of freedom. It is an empty realm. Here man's magnificent power over nature has left him alone with himself, powerless. It is the boredom of youth without a future.
And will you be content simply to pick your ironic and philosophical way through all these boredoms? Or perhaps to invent a new one, just right for the occasion, the exquisite boredom of the never-ending dinner party with its overpolite host, the boredom of shattered pride, tinged with the subtle hues of intellectuality? The boredom of the intellectual of the Left? No. There are other things to be done. There are things to be created. And let no one say that it is impossible. Men have always created, in a life-enhancing way, with the vitality of animals. Every father produces a living being. Every artist, every era, has produced their works of art. Wasn’t your own village a new town once? It was built on the banks of the Gave, like this one, and because it was alive, it evolved a form. It is precisely because you reject aestheticism that you should take art as your model: art transformed into the art of living. The new town is a challenge to men to create human life! . . . But no one should say that it’s an easy task! These days it is extraordinary how analogous the various spheres of knowledge and praxis are. Mathematicians are trying to measure the perceivable and the concrete; it seems they have reached their goal – and then suddenly concrete reality vanishes; the gap seemed to be narrowing, but up close it appears wider than ever. The same surprise (and a fruitful one) awaits the biochemist who attempts to understand and produce human tissue. The thing is that men have two different ways of creating and producing, and as yet these have not intersected: spontaneous vitality, and abstraction. On the one hand, in pleasure and in play; on the other, in seriousness, patience and painful consciousness, in toil. Might not the same be true of towns, those products of social living? Perhaps. And here we are facing the same problem as before: how to reproduce what was once created spontaneously, how to create it from the abstract. Possible? Impossible? If the concept of what is possible is separated from the concept of what is not possible, both become meaningless. If we aim at what is impossible today, it will become tomorrow’s possibility. And no matter how immense the gap between the possible and the impossible, the aim and the goal, abstraction and living, may appear, you must make every effort to bridge it. So read the text of the new town, like the mathematician, the physicist and the biochemist read theirs. Use it as an experiment, as a laboratory, as a test tube if you like, but not in the sense in which some clumsy lab assistant might handle inert materials. Think of it as a place of privileged experiment where at last men are about to conquer and control their everyday lives, through trial and error, successive approximations, abstractions superseded and concrete reality achieved, which is the path knowledge must follow towards predictable and unpredictable totality.
'No, we will not find a style for our age in a place like this. But we will find the way towards it. For it is here that our age must face up to the challenge. And if one day, by luck or by judgement, it does find its style in everyday life, and if it does manage to resolve the duality between the “technical object” and the “aesthetic object”, then surely the success will be all the more dazzling because of the setbacks, and the tremendous efforts involved. “Transform the world” – all well and good. It is being transformed. But into what? Here, at your feet, is one small but crucial element in that mutation.'
Somewhat rashly, for I was out alone and the water was rather choppy, I swam until the shore was almost out of sight. When a wave lifted me up, the sea was ridged like an incalculable number of backbones, and in the distance, between the surf, the rocks and the pebbled slope of the beach, stretched the yellow strip of sand, narrow, out of reach. A lovely, stiff, freshening wind was whipping up the white horses, filling my ears with the joyfully ribald sea shanty a lady love once taught me:

The north wind's got a big 'un on  
And the sea's in the family way  
When he comes on full blast  
She'll wriggle 'er arse  
And give birth to twelve whales in one day . . .

A cloud hides the sun. Then, from anxiety, the vision was born. Intense, reflective (I was marvellously attentive and lucid), active (I was swimming as hard as I could to get back to the beach), the vision outgrew and surpassed the fascinating spectacle in which I was actively participating.

Waves. Precise, limitless waves. They roll in from beyond the horizon, they flee and unfold in the foam. They come one by one, regular, distinct, identical. They will die on the sand and the rocks. On one side, driven by the wind into sharp crests, they are like knife blades raised in threat. Before me I see the backs of the waves which have swept by me on their race to the shore. They represent the past for me. I will have nothing more to do with them. But those to come, those which are about to assail me, lifting me up and hurling me down into a sudden void, trying to swallow me up, those which are rushing towards me, for me they are the future; they are the virtual, the possible. What I see is the possible — mortal, or mortality conquered if I can respond to its challenge — as it comes into being, as it becomes me. Wave follows wave, each wave like the other, and yet the
waves which have passed are completely different from the waves which are to come. I am taken up by another wave as soon as the previous one has released me. It lifts me on to its crest (the metaphor of the sea as ‘white horses’ can be understood only when one sees waves from a distance or from behind, as I do now, my eyes following them as they race away from me) and I struggle, briefly suspended on this crest like a bird balancing on the wind. Then with all my weight I plunge into a swirl of spindrift which blinds me and lashes me and stuns me. It takes hold of me and tries to suffocate me. It is the present, the here-and-now. It is the instant; it hurls its challenge and its power at me; if I cannot overcome it, I shall die.

In fascinating simultaneity, present, past and future are juxtaposed; I can see the possible drawing near, life or death. I experience the present, I am both its prey and its master (while I can still struggle and as long as I do not give in). I see the past running away. In front of me? Behind me? I no longer know. And that is what the vision is – knowledge penetrating beyond the known. The past cannot be dismissed as a mere memory. It is still there, a danger overcome. It no longer has any effect on me, but it is still active in the distance, and when it expires it will be reborn; it tells me of the obstacles I have to overcome if I am to reach the shore. The possible cannot be reduced to some kind of uncertain and unreal eventuality. It is there just behind me. It is racing towards me. It is threatening me. It is preparing itself. It is rolling and leaping in from afar. The event is drawing near, expanding, materializing, ready to come crashing down.

And I perceive them simultaneously. Almost submerged as I am by matter in movement, my sense of reality is no longer segmented in a fixed and reliable way, like a series of blocks. Through this vision of simultaneity reality becomes restructured, a shifting totality, roaring, buffeting, overwhelming: the sea. The vision is of something intangible, something elusive, a strange and liberating truth. This simultaneity exists for me and because of me. For me and because of me one thing follows another. I can have no doubt about this time and this space which are trying to engulf me. And yet, at the precise moment of threat, it is still me who brings order to the depths. I am surrounded – for an instant, for another instant – by a fluidity which I can touch, which I can control; yet I cannot grasp it in my hands. In the midst of all this tumult and instability, I remain permanent but vulnerable, caught in a wild attempt to defend that permanence. I am permanence, I am fragility. How can I coincide with everything that is, without letting myself be swallowed up? At the centre of this chaos of repetition, within this gigantic being, I maintain an order, my order, the order of a being who is struggling to maintain his
being. My shifting, active identity is incredibly different from the
shifting, active identity of these waves as they repeat each other, each
new one taking up from the terrifying void left by its forerunner, the
void which, like the waves, goes on repeating itself endlessly. And I,
what am I? A sort of minute organism caught up in these undulating
movements which is fiercely defending its precarious frontiers – teeth
clenched, eyes closed, lips sealed tight – a fragile structure tossed by
universal becoming, by a tumult which bears it along and seeks to
destroy it.

This becoming is not a commonplace flux, an ever-flowing river, a
shapeless mobility, a never-ending fluidity, a linear movement in
which ephemeral happenings appear and disappear. It is a remorse­
less repetition of sameness which is never quite the same, of otherness
which is never quite other than what it is, since the repetitions grow
larger or smaller, reach a crashing, convulsive climax or fade peace­
fully away. What could be stranger or more fascinating than this
mixture of the real and the imaginary: repetition? Each of these waves
has its own characteristics, its own individuality almost, dangerous or
threatening, made up of necessity (when each wave surges up, its
shape is a repetition of all the others) and of a thousand accidents,
which are necessary too. Each wave is multiple, polyrhythmic. It is not
something simply governed by the movement of the sea, the rising
tide, the wind. As it rises up in all its inevitability, it contains innu­
merable smaller rhythms, like an entire world; it gives birth to smaller
waves which themselves carry delicate water-movements, small fur­
rows, whorls, lace, brocade and foam, there before my eyes and my
lips; lively tresses which unfold, greenish walls which tower up sud­
denly only to tumble down into semi-liquid chasms which suddenly
vanish. Each short-lived, ever-repeated wave carries a smaller, even
more ephemeral wave which repeats itself in turn. The shorter-lived
the wave, the more durable the wave which gives it birth appears,
and yet that too is ephemeral. How vivacious and delightful these
phenomena are, against their ever-vanishing, ever-appearing back­
ground. Where do these subtle wave-harmonics end? How far do they
go? Not everything is visible to me. There is always something else,
always something unexpected, always something which seems to be a
fragment but is suddenly a whole. Sometimes the sea rises abruptly, as
if to engulf me, yet it enfolds me like a mother, gently stroking the
back of my neck, but still trying to smother me, and offering a page
from a magical picture book for me to gaze at. Yes, it is never the same
wave, nor is it ever a completely different one. Disturbing, spellbind­
ing: the sea. Am I dreaming, is this imaginary? Is this reality at its
harshest? I can no longer say.
The vision brings me the dazzling intuition of a precise and singular relation: the crest of the wave brings forth the trough, and vice versa; the one implies the other; they rely on each other, yet they are mutually exclusive and implacably antagonistic. One has its place and duration, the other follows on with inexorable necessity. Such is the logic of the ocean! Each of its terms is a limit to the other, determining it, creating its conditions, making it first possible, then inevitable. Then, by the very necessity it has created, each term yields its place to the other (the place it occupied did not really belong to it). Each term renders the other impossible, excluding it, including it, in a partnership where conferring reality and derealization are mutual necessities. It is chaotic and violent, but it has its law. The duration of each wave is strictly determined by its objective logic, which leaves us with an indeterminable wealth of contingencies, accidents, appearances, and – I was about to say – ornaments. Logic and splendour. Before me, around me, I have space–time.

But no. I have forgotten the no. I was on the point of forgetting something else, something even more important. There are three. There are three of us. Not two. There is the massive ocean. If I was prepared to put my life on the line and swim out to sea, I might get a glimpse of how superficial the play of the waves is compared with the enormity of the deep. And there is the wind, too, and the air, and the light. And over there is the shore, now almost beneath my feet (luckily for me). On all sides there are boundaries, limits, and deepness, that other deepness, the deepness of sky and water. The fearful turbulence of the waves happens only in the space shared by the air, the wind, the light, the sea, the marches of sky and ocean, their common limits. There are three. Not two. And myself, I was about to forget myself, but I am the third one too, caught up in the imperturbable motion, fighting to defend myself, a thing of pathetically precarious stability with its own movements, its own laws, its own order.

Three. The third term. On every side. Inside the limits, in the relation between what is limiting and what is limited. Beyond the limits, in the limitless depths of harmonics and in the amplitude of space. And in my consciousness, too, which stretches to the horizon and beyond the horizon as far as the sun as it fades away, and beyond that sun. Through me and my consciousness a totality is achieved – a supersession – but not of my own making...

I have swum as hard as I could towards the beach. I am tired. I have reached the surf. At this point the beach slopes up steeply. Suddenly I am caught up in a massive eddy which swirls me round. Just when I thought I was home and dry, I am face to face once more with the vastness of the open sea. For a brief instant I hallucinate. The sea is an
enormous brain, with cerebral convolutions transmitting innumerable messages in all directions. A message of death has been issued, I know not whence, but now it has reached me. The ocean is thinking; and in this madhouse where millions of floodtides interconnect, I am what it is thinking, I am a foreign body. I am the target. The ocean wants to void itself of this minute little islet, this defiant skull with its throbbing temples, with its rival organ pulsating within. It is sucking me in to be rid of me. It is unrelenting. It strikes out at me. . . . Panic. For a brief instant, delirium.

The final effort. The beach. At last! Never before have I been so close to nature. For a while I have seen the sea in the same way as men of former times – hunters, shepherds, magicians, soothsayers – must have seen their beasts and their stars. Within me, reason and insanity have come together. I stand up on my own two feet at last, truth running down from my body like sea water, seeping away into the sand. Never before have I experienced my own strength and willpower so clearly. And the hesitant emergence of consciousness. . . .
The notion of nature has been thrown into disrepute by the excesses of cosmological romanticism, while systematic philosophy has never renounced the philosophy – i.e. ontology – of nature (nowadays it is experiencing a new and much-publicized lease of life with Teilhard de Chardin, and with some inferior imitators of Engels at his most dubious). Naturists and nudists have trivialized this notion of nature, either by prettifying it or by submitting it to an elementary scientism based on physics or physiology. To cap it all, the ecstatic posturings of the bourgeoisie or of technicists have made it insufferably trite: 'worlds' of silence, of depths, of heights, of spaces reached via 'modern' means.1 Decadent ontology is not alone in capturing nature: journalism, literature and the mass media have ensnared it too. They have defused it to make it more interesting; their gaudy waffle has turned the concept of nature into a cliché.

And yet the notion of nature has not been exhausted. It is still buoyant. It still has a few metaphilosophical or philosophical surprises in store for us. Is this as a result of the exploration of the cosmos – macro or micro? Partly. It is highly likely that cosmological hypotheses will emerge which will make present attempts at synthesis, ontology, and a complete picture of the universe look instantly ludicrous. The time is not yet ripe for reducing or integrating all the differences, dualities, pluralities and multiplicities into a 'totality'. On the contrary: while pursuing our critique of separations, we must go on emphasizing differences.

How could we give a 'picture of the universe' in this day and age, just when we are starting to supersede our 'world'; when we are becoming aware of the earth because we are about to leave it; when the term 'world' is losing its meaning because it is used so indiscriminately; when our investigation of the universe is only just beginning? Nowadays any cosmological hypothesis or picture of the 'world' based on contemporary research in the specialized sciences can have one function only: apologia and propaganda. It is no accident that at the
present time Marxist apologetics frequently sounds like Christian propaganda, and has an analogous ideological intention. Marxism in this debased form has become an ontologo-philosophical system with contradictory characteristics: it is inflexible, fossilized, yet it has no shape of its own. It has given matter the same status as the Hegelian Idea, and now it is ready to confront whatever metaphysical theory may come along. However, there is one fact which this critique must be careful not to overlook: we have before us, here and now, a whole. It is both the condition for production and the product of action itself, the place for mankind and the object of its pleasure: the earth.

With all its imprecision, and because of that imprecision, the notion of nature designates cosmic reality without implying an ontology or a cosmology. But this is not the only reason for its revival. Differences between spontaneity and abstraction in social practice are suddenly becoming apparent: between nature and technology, between nature and culture. The only possible way of grasping their relation is as a dialectical conflict. We must think of culture as twofold (conquest or acquisition, power, consciousness conquered on the one hand, abstraction and artificiality on the other) and similarly, nature as twofold (vitality, spontaneity and energy on the one hand, unconsciousness, powerlessness and non-culture on the other). In other words, the distance between man and nature is widening, but there are men who realize this and are attempting to bridge the gap and re-establish direct contact and communication.

When we reflect on being, we see that it is doubly determined. On the one hand we have the being of representation, abstract being. This ‘being’ belongs first and foremost to grammar and logic. But in so far as discourse is part of praxis, and logic leads to practical decisions, abstract being goes beyond abstraction. Representation projects itself in advance of the here-and-now, and of what has been accomplished. It does not simply represent that which is experienced empirically (though less richly than practical experience does), it also designates the goal of actions. In his work and his activities man differs from active, working animals, and in particular from social animals, in that he has a representation of his goal. As Marx put it: ‘the end-product of the process of labour already exists as a representation in the mind of the worker’.

However, being is not only one step ahead of consciousness; it also lags behind it. We also use the word ‘being’ to designate that from which we have gradually emerged during our long history. Each of us relives and rediscovers this in miniature in our individual consciousness. We humans have never managed to get over our nostalgia for this ‘being’: mother, world. And perhaps it is best not to get over it,
even if nostalgia may play dirty tricks on us. We live in hope that history, our history and the history of humanity, will come full circle and bring back the distant past of cosmic innocence, resurrecting that lost, forgotten world within us.

Nature designates these two ‘beings’ in a confused way. On the one hand it points to the ‘human being’, the ‘human nature’ which will emerge and is already emerging from history, which will never be able to separate itself completely from nature as a given. The human being is forced to dwell with antinature (abstraction) painfully and long, and is already trying to return to nature, to put down roots, to find meaning in it, and peace of mind.

On the other hand, nature designates the origin, what history has emerged from, something which both transforms and reveals itself in the succession of forms taken by action, by abstraction, by the signs which underpin and facilitate action, and by human power.

In its confusion, nature unites these two determinations. This unity is not achieved theoretically or practically, it is not lucid or transparent. It is confused. There are several theoretical and practical problems which the notion of nature cannot resolve. Notably, this one: ‘How does the being of history – man, the historical being – create the history of being? And how can we unite these two aspects and resolve the contradiction?’ The notion of nature does not present any precise ontological presupposition. In its confusion, it sets no limit on action or on theorizing. It does not systematize. It is not dogmatic. Therefore it leaves us free to investigate.

The notion of nature appears to be richer, more confused, less simple and more full of meaning than notions such as ‘matter’, ‘things’, ‘in-itself’, ‘being’, ‘givens’, ‘the real’, ‘objects’. All these have been more or less explained and exhausted by philosophy (critique or ontology, it doesn’t matter which). It is precisely this confusion and lack of ‘structure’ which makes this notion of particular interest to dialectical thinking. Mixed and interwoven in the image-concept of nature, several opposing ‘formants’ can be discerned, though they are not absolutely clear. Some come from man and from praxis, the others from what existed before praxis, outside of praxis and, of course, before consciousness. It happens that we use the same word to designate nature in man (human nature: instinct, need, desire) and nature without man, before man, outside of man. History splits into two: ‘nature’ and ‘the human’. Man splits into ‘nature’ and ‘history’. Philosophy and ontology divide up what is given into a dichotomy, with the result that the concomitant analysis becomes one-sided. It loses the benefit of the double determination, that is to say, the dialectical movement within this confusion. It separates the cosmological
(and being) from the anthropological (and from thought). But 'thought and being are distinct, but at the same time they are in unity with one another'. Moreover, the double determination cannot become united or supersede itself by and through representation, but by a praxis. This would make man one being, both culture and nature, without contradictions, without naturalism and without artificiality.

These contradictory formants fall within a confused unity, a poorly elucidated whole. Will a genuinely dialectical analysis enable us to distinguish one from the other? Probably, up to a point; but it is certain that traditional materialist or idealist ontology will be of no help. If it is incontrovertible that nature—whatever attributes and determinants we give the concept—exists before consciousness, before thought, before 'mind', and before the knowledge we obtain about it, then it has nothing in common with things. The concept of the thing is indispensable for designating the results of technical activity, but the minute we apply it more generally it becomes trivial and antidialectical. To conceive of matter as thing is a way of skating round all the problems. In fact, the second-rate philosophers who call themselves Marxist while churning out traditional philosophy (ontology) believe they have resolved all the so-called philosophical problems by eliminating them at the level of the material thing and its 'reflection' in consciousness. In Marx's words, they reduce the 'logic of the thing' to the 'thing of logic'. Once reflective thought stops making matter synonymous with the thing, then nature reappears with all its confusions, its problems, its difficulties, which it shares with the notion of praxis. What in praxis comes from biological 'reality', from physics or from physiology? What comes from history, from culture, from sociological 'reality'? Only an analysis on different levels, which would also grasp the interaction between these levels and reconstruct them in a totality—and thus a long and possibly endless analysis—could say.

The 'external world'? Obviously, it exists. But then, if we use the concept ontologically, the only thing we can state definitely is that it exists and that there is movement, but that the 'in-itself' is inaccessible, because only an infinite pursuit—by knowledge and action—would make it otherwise. If we use the concept logically, the only definite statement we can make is one long relentless repetition: 'It exists, before consciousness, externally ....' But as soon as we use the concept dialectically, dialectical thought will immediately formulate the following: 'What is most external is most internal, and vice versa.' If this formula means anything, then there is a dialectical movement in reality and in the consciousness of reality, a movement grasped by knowledge. But does it mean anything? In my opinion, it does. Our
most secret desires can be understood only in terms of certain basic needs which were originally independent from consciousness, even though they belong to conscious being: vital needs, physiological and biological, thus 'natural'. Desires transform needs, desires derive from needs. Sexual and sensual desire is defined by an organ and a vocabulary, which do not always correspond. Yet the one internalizes the demands and stimulations of the other, in spite of the distance between them, and this is their only possible means of corresponding. The most intimate desire, whether amorous or erotic, is linked on the one hand to spontaneous subjectivity and on the other to the reproductive demands of the species per se, and thus to socially constructed (or tabooed) possibilities. Another example: the internal discourse which plays a ground bass to our conscious life comes from something fundamentally external to it: objects signified by signs, their formal combinations, a society which on the one hand produces objects and on the other develops language. These are what structure our internal language. Conversely, everything each one of us grasps (everything 'we' grasp) from the outside world comes from 'us', a particular group, a global society. Whatever lies within or beyond the practical powers which men have effectively acquired, 'externality', the 'itself', exists, but beyond the range of both knowledge and action. What else can I say about it, other than that it exists? Whatever we can formulate as thought has been made into a reality 'for us' by praxis, and it is therefore not the action of some kind of independent and externalized consciousness which internalizes it; it has been transformed into consciousness by praxis and the movement of praxis. So for us (for me, for you, for each and every one of us) this is how objects, produced by practical activity, become words, signals, signs, symbols and images, and these constitute a 'world' which is both internal and external. Signs presuppose the distance between the human subject and objects (things). But at the same time signification overcomes this distance, and through signification things and consciousness coincide. Thus although consciousness is radically different from the world of things, it is nevertheless consciousness of things, via their signs. And communication between one consciousness and another takes place via signs. Signs and signals indicate what is immediately accessible; images and symbols express and try to present what is far away, in the distance. So effectively, what is most external and what is most internal coincide. As for my consciousness, it defines itself as a consciousness of these objects, of these signs and symbols. It does not 'reflect' what one might call a 'semantic field'; it is that semantic field in its totality. And yet, because the semantic field 'is' a social phenomenon, it is not dependent upon my consciousness. It
contains the virtual possibilities of consciousness. Thus consciousness is not placed outside it or in front of it. It ‘is’ (and I use the word cleansed of all ontology and substantialism) consciousness of these objects, of these things, of their signs and significations, of their relations and connections. As for reflective consciousness (thought), it reflects and yet does not reflect; it dominates the semantic field and tries to pass through the various levels within it. Thus consciousness is neither thing nor substance, nor is it the simple ‘reflection’ of a thing or a system of things. In the same way words (phonemes and morphemes) are neither a reality nor the reflection of a reality, but the signs of a reality (nor do they ‘reflect’ the forms things take when grouped together, but neither are they incompatible with them). This is how a consciousness linked to social praxis can grasp things, objects, products, material and social relations as systems, while being neither a reality with the same status as things nor a pure and simple reflection of things, without reality.

Thus the ‘semantic field’ is poised on top of nature without being identical to it. On the one hand it refers to nature, on the other to praxis. Therefore, in the principle of double determination which we are attempting to develop here, we see the concept of nature appearing once again. Now it becomes possible to think about it speculatively, that is, ontologically. I can define nature as ‘my starting point for questioning beings in themselves . . . my starting point and, as I make the effort to follow the birth and formation of one being or another, my perceived destination and the reason for my ability to make statements . . . ’ One could even define nature as the ‘foundation’, or the ‘foundation’ as nature, or perhaps nature as the pre-objective or the pre-subjective, or as detotalized totality (or perhaps vice versa).

We do not deny that such speculative uses of the notion may be valid, but here we will limit ourselves to its analytical application. Pure nature (the nature of Rousseau, of Feuerbach, of waves in the open sea or of a Pacific atoll) is the place or the time from which man is absent. If I rid my experience – individual and social practice – of all the things which knowledge recognizes because action has put them there, what is left? An intangible residue. To use this residue as a starting point is feasible, but it presents difficulties. The moment human hands, or eyes, or tools, touch pure nature, it is no longer ‘pure nature’. Yet that is how it ‘is’: the open sea, the space between the stars. The contradiction (and thus the double determination) is already apparent in action and in theory, in concept and in practice. It is extraordinarily stimulating. It is forever being resolved in the transition from the ‘thing-in-itself’ to the ‘thing-for-us’, and is forever reappearing at the very heart of this difference. So it is for the depths
of the cosmos, for interplanetary space, for heights and the underwater deep, for the waves in the open sea, for harmonics – those ‘formants’ or ‘partials’ which only a subtle analysis of the global phenomenon can contact.

Now, let us reverse the statement. We said that nature is the place and the duration (space and time) from which man is absent; it is therefore the place and the instant where the absence of man is revealed, and which gives anyone who comes into contact with it the fascinating impression of presence as absence: abyss and possible action. In this inaccessible place, at the heart of this absence, something comes back to us which is not a memory; our origins, the origins ‘we’ came from at a time when effectively ‘we’ were not there because we had not yet begun to be. There the finite and the limitless interact, the chasm and what emerges from it. The force of this fascination is that at one and the same time it reveals the depth and the field of possibilities, the obstacles and resistances which underpin it. The desert is terrifying but fascinating, like the ocean or the starry abyss. And it is in the interplanetary void that we at last perceive the earth as a ‘world’: ours, our microcosm. The place from which man is absent is also the place where man begins, taking shape and moving ahead of himself. Before man can use his hands and his tools, he has to become aware of the birth of possibility, that outpouring of surprises and discoveries.

Nature is also what man lacks (and what culturalism and purely cultural anthropology overlook). Wherever man lives, he works, he is active, he constructs. He produces. He creates from abstraction: compared with nature, the instrument he uses is an abstracting abstraction. He separates, he divides, he isolates and maintains. Any object produced by a (technical) process, stabilized by that process or a subsequent one, and finally utilized according to a series of defined and stable processes, is an abstraction which strives unsuccessfully to attain a concreteness which for ‘us’ would be superior to nature. The same applies to mathematical signs and to language. And – to use the example again – the same applies to the ‘machine for living in’, that abstract thing, that empty space where men must live out and furnish their everyday lives, where it is glaringly obvious that men and nature are absent. Nature is absent, therefore there is nothing human about it. What can be said about external nature (about the ‘external world’) can also be said about the ‘internal world’. Man is a being of need, agreed. Let us use that as a definition. Certainly, it is a valid definition; but it is a statement, not an ontological truth, and we should accept it as such. We should not transform the words ‘be’ and ‘being’ into absolutes. This would be a speculative operation, and we should
soon see that we had defined the (partially) known by the unknown (the most unknown) and the complex by something even more complex. What is need? It is natural need. But does not being human mean to desire rather than to need? Is there not a discontinuity between need and desire, or several discontinuities? A transformation, or several transformations? What are they? Desire has been mediated by labour, by language, by culture, by social checks (inhibitions and authorizations). It can exist socially only if it recognizes these mediations. Yet what can be more intimate than this secret desire which consciousness has difficulty identifying and bringing to the level of expression and signification, not to mention satisfying it in full? It interacts with images and symbolic systems. We can no longer say whether it is artificial or natural. It is a reflected reality – not in the sense of mental reflection (reflective thought), but in so far as it is constituted and recognized (or recognizes itself) via its own images, via the symbols or signs which reveal it to itself. When the man of need reappears, he is terrifying; he is man reduced to basics: hunger, thirst, sex. When he loses his uselessness, his artificiality, his luxuries, his superfluosness, his imagination, his games – in a word, his desire – he loses his human dimensions. The man of need is man stripped down to a sordid nakedness, to the pure nature of man. But because man and nature no longer coincide, this ‘world of need’ is no longer man, it is human poverty. All that desocialized and disindividualized need can do is to protect man as the ‘human species’ from dying, on the level of biological interdependence. Need, the pure nature of man, is nothing more than man immobilized, disarmed, dismembered, threatened by imminent death: the man of wars, of panics and mass evacuations, of concentration camps.

And so, again, nature is the place and the instant where man is sapped of his strength, where man is lacking, where he is born and reborn, if that is possible for him. But it is also what man lacks. Desire supersedes need and, through a multiplicity of mediations, endows it with human richness, enclosing it like a shell. Without need there can be no desire. When man (individually or collectively, in a group or in isolation) disregards lack, when spontaneous and vital need is missing, desire collapses. He becomes abstract and artificial. And this artificial man, ‘rich’ with an abstract and alienating wealth, slides back into absolute poverty.

Marx has left us a great many texts which employ the word ‘nature’. They do not elucidate the concept completely, which makes them all the more valuable in terms of what they suggest. Because they are difficult to understand, they can be interpreted – and have been – in a variety of ways, some of them contradictory. One can even blithely
throw these texts overboard, insisting that the notion of ‘matter’ is clear and decisive. In other words, one can replace ‘nature’ by ‘things’. Dogmatism can retain its internal coherence by disregarding the texts which it cannot cope with – such as this one, for example, with its obvious irony:

If it is to overcome its opponent, misanthropic, fleshless spiritualism, and that on the latter’s home ground, materialism has to chastise its own flesh and turn ascetic. Thus it passes into an intellectual entity; but thus, too, it evolves all the consistency, regardless of consequences, characteristic of the intellect. . . .

Do we need to remind ourselves that in the Hegelian terminology which Marx is still using here, there is nothing pejorative about the ‘intellectual entity’, since it strives towards a moving, living totality, while understanding (‘the intellect’) remains one-sided, static and abstract, capable of making distinctions only in terms of logical reifications?

Today (in 1960) we are much better situated for achieving an overall understanding of Marx’s thought and a map of its contours than we were twenty or thirty years ago, precisely because we are more aware of its limitations. Marx loathed the English bourgeoisie for being so puritanical. To counter their Philistinism he appealed to eighteenth-century French bourgeois thought, which he saw not as a materialist ontology but as a philosophy of sensual satisfaction. Marx’s ideological passions became crystallized in a sharply defined, vivid hatred which runs throughout his work: his hatred of Malthus and Malthusianism. This hatred was not motivated by a moral principle, and even less by any populationist policy. Marx had it in for Malthus because, implicitly or explicitly, he denied the proletariat its right to love. Authentic Marxist thought has a style: the style of the intensification and broadening of life. This style has been completely abandoned by today’s ‘Marxists’. It attempted to maintain the anthropological principle and naturalism, and to unify them. Marx did not oppose Malthus so that the proletariat could have a lot of children, but so that the future and the possibilities within the proletariat could be freely open to concrete love, that is, physical love. He would scarcely have approved of the way his vision has been made into a support for moral order, in a way that marginalizes political content: contradictions become unified and extreme opposites are brought together! This is the result of a materialism which has been systematized according to the logical rules of understanding, a parsimonious, pedantic materialism.

Marx retained the same elements from French materialism that, in
our view, the French proletariat has retained in its practical behaviour: the search for an art of living which would multiply desires and pleasures without separating them from labour, as the bourgeoisie do. Like Hegel, the above text distinguishes between understanding and dialectical reason. The first, frigid and arid, works on abstractions which it keeps in the abstract; it separates, and at the same time it systematizes. Dialectical reason grasps real movements. Moreover, the text is as anti-Hegelian as it is Hegelian, above all because of its irony. When materialism becomes philosophically systematized (developed) by analytic understanding it acts like a frost, numbing all that is palpable, killing off all the differences which can be deployed only by dialectical reason. It undervalues pleasure and sensual satisfactions; it exalts the laboriousness of work; it defines man as a being of lack and of labour. This newfangled moralism imagines that it is leading a victorious crusade against the vice of idealism, whereas by forgetting nature it is in fact imitating idealism!

In 1844, Marx wrote:

*Industry* is the real historical relationship of nature, and hence of natural science, to man. If it is then conceived as the exoteric revelation of man's essential powers, the human essence of nature or the natural essence of man can also be understood. Hence natural science will lose its abstractly material, or rather idealist, orientation and become the basis of a human science. . . . Nature as it comes into being in human history – in the act of creation of human society – is the true nature of man. . . . The social reality of nature and human natural science or the natural science of man are identical expressions.7

Far be it from us to think that these texts by Marx contain the ultimate truth, like the Sibylline Books! With this reservation in mind, one must admit that the above text is both profound and obscure. Nowadays, when there is more than one theorist questioning the future of industry and of 'industrial civilization', to use the fashionable term, this text is worth examining in detail. Why does Marx define industry as the 'exoteric' (i.e. external) revelation of man's essential powers? Either it is meaningless, or it means that there is also an inner (esoteric) revelation. Where does this second revelation take place? How many self-styled Marxists there are who do not bother to look for it, and see industry – together with industrial labour, technology and political economy – in a narrowly economic way as the total revelation of the powers of man. Moreover, what does this nature which comes into being in the act of creation of human society, in human history, entail?
Obscure and impenetrable, these texts have become literally incomprehensible as a result of the impoverishment of a certain self-styled 'Marxist' philosophy. If their richness of meaning is to be rediscovered, we must inaugurate a series of theoretical processes, which will include a reinstatement of Marxist supersession of systematized philosophy, a radical critique of materialist and idealist ideology, and the rejection of superficial scientism and philosophico-political subjectivism. Without these preconditions, the notion of nature will go on oscillating between the idealist ontological interpretation and the materialist one. Its content will never become clear.

Throughout his work, seen from this point of view and in so far as it relates to the problem under review, Marx demonstrates that labour, industry and technology act as mediators between man as he is formed by himself and the nature he controls. These mediations begin to create a 'human world' and a 'human nature', that is, humanized, subordinated and integrated within the human – in a word, appropriated.

Where and how is the esoteric (inner) revelation accomplished in the history of man's powers – in other words, the history of his appropriation of his own nature, or the nature within him, through practical activity? To understand this, the reader of Marx must interpret or extrapolate, since Marx himself wrote nothing explicit about it. We must use a wide range of texts and passages from texts to reconstitute a sort of 'initial and fundamental Marxist project'. Once the simplistic, scientistic and positivist interpretations have been abandoned (namely, the purely economic and purely sociological interpretations, according to which economic activity or the functioning of the social relations of production, made coherent by socialism, would be self-sufficient), two interpretations become possible. One gives priority to ethics, the other to aesthetics. According to the first, Communist society will gain control over nature (the physical, external world) and the productive forces, having first externalized the latter. This will facilitate the constitution of ethical relations between individuals and human groups. These relations will be based upon mutual recognition and the disappearance of the social mystery, and underpinned by complete equality between the surviving individuals and groups, as well as by the satisfying of basic or differentiated needs, including aspirations of an ethical character. At last man will appropriate the earth as a 'general object'.

For the second interpretation, it is art which constitutes human power, and in its history we can see the beginnings of Communist society in embryo. In so far as it produces pleasure and joyfulness, art prefigures the possible relation between man and the world and
between man and himself. It was always the highest form of creative work, towering above fragmented labour, knowledge and the trivial use of discourse and the sensory organs. If art, taken as a specialized activity, brought its own specific alienations, the supersession of art *per se* and its emergence into the entirety of life (into global praxis) would transform this life into complete physical fulfilment. Higher physical fulfilment as prefigured by art and generalized by the reintegration of art into life would be something loftier than the mere satisfaction of needs – even differentiated needs – throughout the course of history. The man of the future will enjoy the earth like a work of art.

Both these interpretations can be backed up by a large number of texts. It seems that Marx has not made a choice himself, so he leaves us free to choose. Do we need to add that, faced with such an option, we find that the majority of arguments and reasons would encourage us to prefer the second of the two, and to prefer total physical fulfilment as opposed to moralism? Unless we prefer to define what is possible by the supersession of opting *per se* . . .

Having said this, certain passages present nature as having the same history as man, showing man either as an extension of natural history, or as an element within it. As we saw, Marx says that there is a ‘social reality of nature’, and that nature ‘comes into being in human history’. Does Marx think that he has resolved the dualisms ‘nature–culture’, ‘natural being–historical being’, or even ‘nature–thought’? Almost certainly. Does he believe that he has eradicated the contradictory relation ‘man–nature’, superseding the antagonism between them simply by proclaiming that they are reconciled? Moreover, did he imagine that to conceive of the unity of nature and human history, like an idea of the future and its possibilities, was tantamount to making it possible? It is difficult to say. Yet in my opinion it is still possible to sum up his essential thinking, as follows: the physis–antiphysis dichotomy is superseded as soon as we realize that it is by antiphysis, or antinature, that man controls and returns to nature. From the basis of abstraction (logical and technological signs and forms) man emerges from nature, understands it, controls it and then reimmerses himself in it once more. Here again man moves ‘wrong foot forward’: via antinature.

Today we are less convinced than Marx that alienation can be absolutely eliminated. Alienation has not vanished. On the contrary. If it has diminished in certain sectors, it has become worse in others. Disalienations or attempts at supersession have created new alienations. Artificiality, abstraction and the futile attempt to rediscover lost spontaneity and naturalness are intensifying. The ‘alienation–disalienation’ dialectic is proving more complex and multidirectional
(like becoming itself, which it is trying to chart) than either Hegel or Marx had imagined. We are forced to give up the idea of an end to alienation via an absolute action, be it philosophical (Hegel) or sociopolitical (Marx).

In particular, Marx could not have known that certain aspects of the ‘human world’ of technology, accumulation and industry would be tenaciously dehumanized, and that it would itself become an objective power, that is to say, alienated and reified, endowed with a kind of autonomy. The esoteric revelation does not emerge from the esoteric revelation. The gap between them is widening; it is becoming immense, leaving more and more room for inventiveness and creativity (and therefore for freedom), but also for doubt and uncertainty. On the other hand, nature which comes into being in human history – the social reality of nature – is not synonymous with nature as a given. On the contrary: it is opening a door for the discovery of the limitless cosmos.

To these preambles we should now add two contradictory observations about the relations between nature and culture:

(1) In culture and civilization, there is nothing which is not acquired and won from nature – by labour and technology, via the use of abstraction and tools – so that the word ‘nature’ becomes a vague ahistorical way of designating a historical result which is at one and the same time the fulfilment of the human and its alienation. So nature is mastered and controlled, but in the process the ‘human being’ is in danger of losing his way, of becoming lost (in abstraction perpetuated as such, fetishized and ‘reified’ as such in artificiality).

(2) In culture and civilization, there is an initial ‘given’ – profound, primordial, yet ungraspable as such, obscure, fertile – from which nothing can emerge without being transformed by praxis, which in turn remains part of it. This ‘given’ we call ‘nature’; human power constantly reinvests the abstract forms it has extracted and the structures it has erected from it. There is nothing indifferent about it; it is by no means an impoverished and passive materiality in the way that things and isolated objects are. It is crammed full of seeds and particularities which cry out (if one can employ that expression) to be clarified. Labour, technology, knowledge, concepts – these do not cut the human off from nature, except perhaps when, consciously or not, thought copies understanding and makes the separation analytically. On the contrary, it is through praxis – that is, in everyday life – that particularities and differences which have emerged in art, in symbols and images, in cultures, in physical fulfilment, via the transformation of needs into desires, become explicit...
According to the logic of understanding, the two observations we have just presented are mutually exclusive. As for dialectical thought, it can seem as incomprehensible as the material it attempts to elucidate; at first it is difficult to distinguish between dialectical thought, absurdity and sophistry. ‘In the human, everything is created and nothing is lost. . . . The natural is the result of the unity between the acquired and the spontaneous . . . ’. An entire system of procedures will be required if we are to demonstrate the meaning and validity of these propositions.

For the time being, however, we will make do with some examples, although we are aware of the limitations of such an approach. Illustrating a proposition is not the same as demonstrating it, and it does not necessarily make it intelligible; if we rely on examples alone, we run the danger of advocating instead of showing, suggesting rather than clarifying, and substituting images for concepts. Nevertheless, because the examples we have chosen bring ‘praxis’ and our theoretical propositions closer together, we will use them to begin with. They turn a spotlight on the notions of nature, necessity and freedom. They show that first and foremost freedom consists in not accepting a necessity. When a necessity is mastered, it becomes modified, transformed into ‘something else’, and often in an unforeseen way.

First example: spring and the discovery of spring

From the very beginnings of art and literature, poetry has sung of the spring: the season of love, flowers, nature as a limitless libido, fertility, the reign of Aphrodite and Venus. Endlessly employed and invested with new meanings (including social and political ones), the expressive theme of Maytime can be considered almost inexhaustible. From the distant past we can still hear the lyrics of Greece and Rome. From the very start, the theme is adopted by French poets (Charles d’Orléans, for example), and in the sixteenth century they develop it on a wide scale; subsequently it is overshadowed by classicism, and then the romantics give it a new lease of life.

According to the ancient conception, which has been perpetuated in the philosophy of nature right up to the present day, nature is physis, a fundamental power. It remains identical with itself throughout space and time, and this implies that the cosmos is finite. Physis is an absolutely spontaneous power, which creates beings, through time. How can it do this without losing its identity? By producing a cyclical becoming, a circular totality composed of circles or partial cycles. The cycle is the prolonging of identity in becoming. It produces again and again, it reproduces itself repeatedly, but these repetitions never
become mere empty reiteration. In this way the cycles of the hours and the days, the months and the seasons, the planets and the sun, the years and the great Year of the Eternal Return, overlap and intermingle. Individually and as a totality they bear the double determination: physis–cosmos. The partial cycles bear divine names, cosmic rhythms exude divine powers, but also human powers. This is the first appropriation of physis by social practice, an appropriation which remains dependent upon the laws immanent within this physis.

In the ancient Dionysian springtime, villagers, townsfolk and citizens re-establish contact with the elemental vitality and brutal spontaneity of creative physis. For a brief moment they break free from their social bonds and their ethico-political conventions. They renew their relation with pure, original nature. They turn nature into a festival; nature becomes a play, and they are the performers. With their dances, their processions, their frenzied masquerades, they mimic unbridled nature. This mimodrama goes far deeper than the tragic dramas of life in the city, with its laws and its political ethic. Community still has solidity, yet it needs to justify itself by these periodic bouts of self-destruction. Social order is undermined, only to return with its solidity reaffirmed, and cosmic order is maintained.

For a period of time, which comes round regularly – repeated and regulated by laws, even though breaking laws is part of the ritual – the citizens throw off morality, politics, knowledge, discourse, rhetoric and the games of reason to plunge themselves into the rhythms of the life force. Once more they come into contact with unconditional spontaneity, and thus with the riddle of life which no man has ever solved. The Sphinx returns, and Oedipus is vanquished – an unproblematic (and provisional) victory which, far from producing problems, offers liberation (if only for a moment) from them. The spring festival disrupts the human order of praxis, joining forces with nature to act out a game, a serious game, repeating the initial gestures of basic needs (eating, lovemaking), reanimating the divine and the cosmic which the logos of the city has lost – identifying with the rhythms of the cosmos.

Now, in their studies of the origins of our society and our culture, folklorists and ethnographers have come up against something extremely puzzling. There are a multitude of folkloric facts and ‘survivals’ which show that for centuries the month of May was smitten by a mysterious curse (which was counterbalanced by efforts to lift and to be free of all taboos). Far from being devoted to celebrating life, physical pleasure, fertility and lovemaking, springtime and the month of May – in our culture – became the habitual time of purity and virginity. Under the suzerainty of the May Queen and the Queen of
Heaven, the Virgin Mary, the month of May became the province of young maidens. Marriages no longer took place in the spring, nor did the engagement ceremonies which, until the sixteenth century, were more important than the wedding itself. In our era the tradition of the ‘Month of Mary’ is still perpetuated in the rituals of that Holy of Holies, the Catholic Church.

What is the explanation? Was it simply a question of the Church substituting the cult of the Virgin for the cult of Aphrodite and Venus? But we know that rituals, images and ideologies operate only by appropriating something which already exists. If they could work without this ‘base’, then there are many theoretical notions which would need to be re-examined. And in any case, this explanation does not account for the secular reinstatement of spring and the month of May at the end of the Middle Ages. In this context, would it be sufficient simply to emphasize the way the Renaissance challenged Christian traditions and took up the themes of Antiquity again? That would still leave us on the level of ideologies and art taken in isolation, and unconnected with social practice. By reducing it to a conflict between abstract representations, we would lose sight of the dramatic character of this struggle between the sacred and the profane, a conflict fought not only in peasant life, but throughout our entire culture.

To help us unravel this small but extremely tangled skein, one simple hypothesis will suffice. For basic agricultures, the spring months are the most difficult. Stocks become exhausted. Part of last year’s crop has to be saved for seeding, and must not be touched. Strict discipline is absolutely vital, and it is maintained under the watchful eyes of the elders, the wise men of the peasant community. The people who work the land do not possess granaries as yet, and cannot provide against difficult times, since they lack the means to do so. They watch anxiously as all around them nature is in fermentation, rich with promises, heavy with threats. In the interval between the previous festivals – the new sun, seedtime, Christmas, Carnival – and the harvest festival to come, a zone of darkness appears: abstinence, discipline, a time of waiting, of anxiety. No surplus energy to squander. Little or nothing to eat. Virtue is made of necessity. The corn grows slowly, and in its whiteness the hawthorn flower represents purity, the thorny purity of this time of emptiness. This month belongs to virgins.

But better times are on the way. New agricultural techniques become widely available. Harnesses and ploughs are improved; systematic crop rotation (virtually continuous cultivation in some regions, with triennial and biennial rotation and no fallowing) becomes widely practised. The productivity of peasant labour increases, as does production itself. Trade in cereals reduces the risk
of famine; it becomes easier to live from one year to the next. The future can be prepared for and organized; granaries (and of course, the rich farmers and townsfolk are the first to profit from this) are piled high with reserves.

And now men – the most 'cultivated' men at first, people from the towns, and then the masses – rediscover the spring. They are amazed by it. They rediscover nature, long forgotten by their ancestors and their fathers. But this spring is no longer the springtime which breaks the laws of the city. It is a springtime which has already been controlled and appropriated. The life of nature no longer unfolds before their eyes, something beyond them, an absurd and ludicrous spectacle, its exuberant blossoms threatening death, a dangerous, turbulent, elemental disorder, a wild, bestial frenzy. At the same time as it resumes its place in the cycle of nature, spring – though still ruled by the law of cycles – becomes subsumed in the cycle of social living. It regains a meaning, but slowly; a few ancient traditions live on – notably, despite the contradiction, the consecration of the month of May to virginity. Bit by bit a symbolism will be imposed upon this new-found springtime, a system of meanings and significations it does not possess as a fact of nature. Through songs and poetry, popular or scholarly, culture re-establishes contact with nature, thus resolving a partial but deep-rooted conflict. People use these songs and poems to appropriate nature again, and to reconstitute a lost symbolism. Nature and history are not made to coincide, but they are no longer separate. Springtime is a festival again, a meeting point, a moment of accord. Nature and history have not become fused, but they are not dissociated either.

The effects of technical, economic and social 'progress' are important not simply because of their direct consequences in those specific sectors (growth in exchanges, monetarist economics, increase in urban populations and the political status of towns). They also influence other areas which have no linear relation with 'progress', bringing consequences which stem from it but in a sense go beyond it: in the sensibility, the feeling and the perception of the 'external world', in the concrete and symbolic perception – the two cannot be separated – of nature. In contradistinction to the simplifications of economism, historicism and 'Marxist' sociologizing, is this not what Marx meant by nature which comes into being socially? By this he meant not only the outside world per se, but nature as appropriated by and for man: internal and external nature, man's own in that it has been appropriated, created in that it has been re-created.

The discovery of spring – that is, its conquest – could figure as an episode in that unconscious epic poem we call the life of social man.
There is no Eternal Springtime, and the Hesperides are no more. Perpetual Spring does not exist outside of the symbolic system used more or less effectively by poets, outside of practical ‘poiesis’. We humans will always have to conquer our springtime, and create it.

With the discovery of spring a unity is inaugurated between man and nature, between necessity and freedom, between ‘subjectivization’ (the formation of consciousness) and objectivization, and man puts down roots in the world, establishing controls over nature. But no sooner have we formulated these propositions than we must modify them. On the one hand, this unity is soon undermined by the appearance of new rifts; on the other, it is not adequate for a complete definition of the man who, in his new-found Dionysianism, immediately remembers that he drinks without being thirsty and makes love in every season of the year (cf. Rabelais); that he is not simply a reasoning and conscious being who can look into the future and contemplate death, but also a being who can laugh.

Second illustration: the modern woman

Here in France not so long ago children used to be born and die off ‘like flies’ (that very insect which plays such an important role in a particularly brutal scheme of natural selection). The survivors rarely reached the age which would be regarded nowadays as ‘average’. Old people were objects of amazement for the rising generations, and their luck in having survived, rather than their survival per se, gave them a sacred aura. They and only they had the time to accumulate experience, memories, and even material wealth and valuables. They were respected. Even on their deathbed they had authority. Every one of them had witnessed the deaths of what for us would be an enormous number of family members and relatives (and the families were much more extensive than they are today).

Under these conditions, which still prevail in backward countries, how were ‘individuals’ (‘souls’, ‘persons’) able to acquire a sense of individuality, and of their own individual death? Death was a fact of nature, generic, impersonal: it scythed people down like so much anonymous grass. Time, the Reaper of God, stacked up the human corn and hay for the tables of heaven or hell. This gave people the advantage of not having to experience a certain form of anguish, and enjoying the spontaneous vitality of a life which could be lived without questioning why or for how long. They did not have to ask themselves the quintessentially modern question of how to be sure of oneself in the knowledge of one’s own death. Nature was both boundless life and death without limits. Wars, famines, floods, fires all came
under the same heading. Natural disasters were indistinguishable from historical catastrophes, and great fears and great joys were equally interconnected.

The community assembled around its wise men and its elders, the elect of death, privileged by death, designated, promised, reprieved. It lived around its dead, among its dead, in the cult of its ancestors, its traditions, its vague recollections and vivid memories (which were rare, since not much happened except deaths and festivals, which tended to merge in the mind, and the odd disagreeable event, like a war, or a natural disaster). As G. Roupnel has written in his *Histoire de la campagne française*, the function of time for peasants was to ‘kill off the living so that the dead could live’. It took more than an instant, and more than one event, to sever what Marx called the ‘umbilical cord’ linking social man to the primitive community. This relation is preserved formally by the shape of our villages, though its content, life and meaning have vanished: the cemetery and the church, nuclei of space, centres of time, regulating the rhythms and the cycles. A way of organizing and symbolizing life is in the process of disappearing, and if its traces are still visible they are becoming less and less legible to ‘modern’ eyes. The praxis has disappeared, and only the ideology remains. The living creature has perished, leaving only the empty shell, an arty and olde-worlde caricature for the tourist consumer to gawk at.

And women?

The ways in which femininity is symbolized are inseparably linked to the role women are destined to play in practical life – they transpose it, amplify it, elaborate on it, but never actually change it. At the very beginnings of our culture and our society, the young unmarried woman enjoyed a certain amount of freedom. She existed as an individual – up to a certain point – within her family and her village, while belonging to a natural group (young women of the same age) within the community, which in turn looked after her welfare, her future, and her most valuable commodity in terms of exchange value with other groups. This could be both pressurizing and oppressive, and was increasingly so, particularly after the cult of virginity was introduced. The ‘great defeat of women’ did not just take place in the Stone Age, a single event. With varying degrees of success and failure, it has been going on ever since. It took on a new and intensified lease of life at the end of the Middle Ages. Up until the sixteenth century – until the Council of Trent – women had the final word about their marriage. After the sixteenth century arranged marriages based on financial considerations became the only way out, the goal, the prize, the supreme disaster. This situation has not changed. Far from it. It is
in the process of being superseded. And that is more or less all one can say about it.

But these are truisms. Let us put their better-known aspects to one side and concentrate upon those areas which have not become clichés. Let us remind ourselves that in times gone by a great many women died in childbirth, and those who survived this curse often saw their children die around them. A mediator between nature and culture, between life and man, between groups and generations, woman (the mother) also became the living mediation between the living and the dead, between the earth and the afterlife. A metaphor for human duality, she was ‘fallen’, and yet at the same time she was beautiful and holy. Therefore it was late in the day, and with considerable difficulty, that women managed to sever the ‘umbilical cord’ joining culture to nature, and at long last discovered and attained a certain amount of individuality.

Up until the previous century, when a woman reached the age of twenty-five she could no longer be called ‘beautiful’, only ‘good’. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century it was proverbial, a general truth, a moral and practical principle, and the rare exceptions proved the rule: at twenty-five, worn out by childbirth, by work, by responsibilities, a woman could no longer be beautiful. No one could see her as beautiful. In Balzac’s time, a woman could look back over her life when she reached thirty. So already the dreaded age has been pushed back. For Balzac, that profound connoisseur of women, the age limit has changed. Soon after that, Baudelaire’s poetry creates the woman who is both beautiful and mature: ‘Her heart, like a bruised peach, is ripe like her body for the arts of love.’

Up until our era, women did not have time to ‘ripen’. For women, maturity meant deterioration. To call a woman ‘mature’ was an insult. Like a year without a summer, leaping from spring to autumn, women passed directly from youth into physical and social decline. They could not keep their bodies young and fresh, they could not keep their knowledge and experience immune from the ravages of living. Allowing for exceptions, women were defined physiologically: young and unmarried (and, hypothetically, virgins), then mothers. Socially, they were defined as mediators between families and groups. It was via women that alliances were made. They excelled in this mediating role. The most gifted and intellectually lucid of them would exchange brilliant letters (and ideas): written correspondence, salons, the hatching of intrigues. Abstraction – of thought, of knowledge, and thus of conscious creativity – was virtually a closed door to them; but to prove their material existence and their vital ability as creative beings was an even more difficult task.
Several scholars (Sauvy, Fourastié) have given extremely good descriptions of certain contradictory phenomena of our times: a longer, more active life for the individual, old people living longer, more time spent on training and education, along with a speeding-up of events, of history, of the accumulation of technology and knowledge. The *creative* consequences of these facts are self-evident. All we need do is to point them out. One of the most striking and most ‘poetic’ of these consequences (using ‘poetic’ in both senses of the word) is the mature woman. This new Eve is still beautiful and desirable, her body has kept its youthfulness. By cultivating her own sensuality and feelings, she has risen above the level of her own physiological and social functions, which hitherto had defined her; she has become a human being, therefore she is no longer limited by her own alienation. As an individualized human being who can assume ‘functions’ without being eliminated by them, who can overcome time, who can fight time and create a new time, this woman is one of modernity’s most extraordinary conquests, although it is still insecure, limited, and poorly understood (even by women themselves). And it is this new woman who gives us hope for ‘modernity’.

This creation (for we really are dealing with a material creation), this production (for we really are dealing with a social product – that is to say, something which is already solidly established in bourgeois society, though limited to an ‘elite’ group who are new but who are no longer exceptions) – brings with it certain dangers and difficulties. To overcome time, to fight against nature while preserving it in all its youthfulness, to ‘assume’ functions while superseding them – techniques are required, lots of them, sophisticated techniques which will help pamper the body and enhance its beauty, techniques of fashion and dress design, techniques for relaxation and for sport. And here there is one particular aspect – and a most attractive one – of this technical operation which almost makes us welcome it. It is not just a question of machines and robots, it is the Eternal Female herself (in fact there is nothing eternal about her, but at least she has stolen a march on nature by superseding it). At the same time, our ironic vision sees the emergence of artificiality on a grand and dubious scale. In the ripeness of the mature woman modernity perceives its own image; it reproduces this image time and time again, and makes full use of it, singing its own praises in a way that is frequently stupid, indecent and malicious; the best and the worst, artifice and nature, conquest and meaninglessness are inextricably intermingled. Dialectic goes on. The new myths proclaiming and glorifying femininity have helped to resuscitate stupidity at its most boring. The bourgeoisie and bourgeois society *per se* can be only partially blamed for this painful turn of events.
This woman, this living construct of civilization, won by the combined efforts of all human beings, is a force to be reckoned with. She uses every weapon she has, and she has many. Man – the male – began by keeping woman subservient. For many centuries he kept her bound and gagged, fearful that she might escape from her bondage. It was a bitter struggle, and history shows its ramifications under the surface of history, beneath the struggles of peoples, the masses and the classes which have hidden it from view; it has never ceased. The victor always found his victory a painful one, and always bemoaned his fate, but this did not stop him continuing his efforts to defeat the enemy. Does the great upgrading of the modern woman mean that the battle of the sexes, that fact of modern life, can be resolved? Apparently not. Women are getting their own back. Many of their specific demands and aspirations are being addressed, and when there are objections against them (in the area of family planning, for example), they are usually disreputable. Yet the demands of women know no bounds. Is this simply because the social group making the demands is itself without defined boundaries, and lacks a 'structure'? For many centuries an illusory masculine wisdom was able to bar women not only from gaining power, but even from wanting it. Today (in 1961) there are women who have been able to develop themselves fully (and why not write: who are gaining power . . . ?) who have not lived through the heroic period of feminism, who have not even found it necessary to ape men and feign masculine qualities in order to engage in the struggle. Implacably, unconsciously, the most active among them are emasculating social life and the men within it. In the past they formed men in order to devour them. Nowadays they inject them insidiously with the virus of profound self-doubt. In the past the process by which the male idealized and then defeminized women was a slow one, lasting many centuries. It was a gradual process of alienation which ended up producing the frigid woman, the hard-headed matron, the bride of ice. Nowadays, women are quicker off the mark. They are threatening men with something vague and terrifying. Sure of one thing – that they are no longer in control – men, males, are no longer sure of anything. Women are in charge of consumption, of part of production, of the household, children’s education, social and cultural life, romance, love. An era of neomatriarchy, of gynaeocracy, is dawning on the horizon. But the threat is an empty one: the endeavour will fail. And so the battle of the sexes goes on. The day when this age-old antagonism is superseded – in other words, when masculinity and femininity as rival entities living on terms of mutual defiance are superseded – is still in the distant future, yet another thing which
This modern woman is a long way from attaining the conscious and internalized self-assurance which men once knew (and which was a concomitant of the subservient female, symbolized, transposed, but always limited by her definition). The modern woman cannot achieve the supreme self-affirmation which is needed to gain free access to all domains. She tries, but to no avail. Sometimes she overshoots the mark, yet she is always short of the starting line. She is always aggressive, always ambiguous. In the past men were able to define the ethic of warrior societies and great conflicts by something from within themselves: heroic masculinity. As yet, women have been unable to draw the opposite definition from within themselves — that of a peaceful and happy society. The feminine press is a powerful and influential medium, and yet it bears witness to this ambiguity and lack of power. It mixes ideology and utopianism, dream and practicality, so that the practical world reads like a dream, while the dream world reads like living reality. Old symbolic systems resurface, packaged with the ambiguous trappings of the unbelievable made believable: astrology, horoscopes, a romantic cosmological bran tub which suggests (and it is never more than a suggestion, in a strange twilight of unreality and derealization) some kind of renewed participation in the lost cosmos, a return to the femininity of nature which men have dissipated. Everyday life is presented as something imaginary, and the imaginary is barely distinguishable from the everyday. It is a shapeless mish-mash, masquerading as nature or as the powers of nature rediscovered. . . .

The modern woman is much too real and too much of a realist to nourish symbols, or to be nourished by them. Only half-believing them, she makes use of them to support and assert herself. But as for myths, there is an epidemic of them: tatty, threadbare myths of femininity, purity, motherhood, love, eternity. The modern woman is largely responsible for the decline of symbolism and the rise of the new mythology, with all the attendant consequences: aestheticism, neoclassicism, austere abstraction and neobaroque. This exploitation of culture and art is threatening them from within. The modern woman is a consumer who produces a little, but not much: what she devours now is not the male, but everything which has been culturally acquired. And that is almost as serious.

But the modern woman is also a victim of her own victory, a victory too recently gained yet already compromised, a victory she is powerless to profit from. She is undermining everything she lives for, everything she loves, everything she aspires to: life itself.

Yet the modern woman can seem like one of the noblest works of
our era, nearer to us, more subtle, and in the end as important – if not more so – than the exploration of the cosmos. Any sociological critique should be not of her genesis and her functions in bourgeois society but, rather, of the quantitative and qualitative limits which restrict her within that society.

We frequently ask ourselves: what is a construct? How does it differ from a product, a thing, an object? Well, here is an answer, for here is the construct at its noblest, its most beautiful, its most disquieting.

This construct illuminates the past of the art it uses and for which it scarcely has a use any longer. What is a woman’s body? A pile of organs and functions, a ‘heap of entrails’ (to quote Rimbaud). That is how prehistoric artists perceived and represented it, attributing magic functions to the vital organs. Not until the advent of more refined cultures, such as that of Greece, did the female nude become separated from its functionality. The female nude which towers victoriously over Greece could not have existed earlier. For Aphrodite is not simply a beautiful woman unclothed, nor the palpable form which Eros embraces; she is nature transformed into beauty. Nature is there, nature and nothing but nature; yet this naked body is already something other than nature. It has been constructed by men: not merely by artists, but communally. It is a construct of generosity. Its divine form transmutes nature into human reality. Immediate and given, radiant, totally natural and totally divine, like a human being gradually feeling his way towards the light of day, this work of art offers the promise that man will succeed, the promise of culture and of civilization.

Consequently, woman, that metaphor for nature appropriated, cannot be separated from what is most exquisite and most subtle – and therefore most disturbing, most artificial and most fragile – in culture and civilization. One senses extraordinary and enchanting links between the natural and the artificial, but these links are not without their darker side. In so far as we can be aware of them in any definite way, the shortcomings of femininity must be laid at the door of culture and civilization, not nature.

Therefore, man’s control over nature is creative. But of what? Of a ‘human nature’ – that is to say, a nature within man, appropriated, transformed. This nature of man and within man – this appropriation by man of his own nature – is linked on the one hand to techniques of appropriation and on the other to nature ‘in-itself’. It cannot be subsumed in either one or the other of these formants, these dehumanized human conditions. As for creativity, it is something amazing, something supreme, even if with hindsight we can see that it was predictable and by no means absurd. Is not this what Marx meant by
these obscure lines: 'History itself is a real part of natural history and of nature's becoming man.'

The creative domination of the human species (which together with classes and nations, includes the two sexes) over nature can never completely separate nature from the human. In its use of abstract signs and signals, and deliberately exhaustive analysis, man's power over nature can go only so far; sooner or later it will have to return to nature to be revitalized – and suddenly there will be creativity once more, unforeseen and spontaneous.

Social time, above all cumulative and technological time – the time of reason – strives to free itself from cosmic time, which is cyclical by nature; but it can never succeed, at least not until further notice. Our everyday life remains bound to the cycles of the hours and the days, the months and the seasons, the years, youth and old age. While technological time unleashes its attack on the cosmos, everyday time remains cyclical. This is a remarkable case of uneven development. But this lagging behind of the everyday in relation to technology is not simply negative. Far from it. For is it not thanks to this uneven development that there are still sensual delights, despite all the cosmic anxieties and interplanetary adventures? Thus, as Marx said, disalienation and alienation follow the same path.

It was Jaspers, in somewhat poetic mood, who issued the following instructions: 'The norm of the day commands that human reality be realized in the world, erected in time, and perfected in an infinite way.'
The examples we have just chosen, springtime and women, afford particularly telling evidence, but there are yet other conquests which are doubly determined: nature and constructs (i.e. products of technology and culture).

Youth and old age are facts of nature. Unlike birth and death (or rather: the ‘beginning and the end’, or, to develop this using the vocabulary of contemporary ontology: ‘emergence and nothingness’) they do not lend themselves to speculative thought; therefore, it is within the remit of this study to deal with them.

If ‘modernity’ – here and now, and using the term without questioning it further – influences the technical control social man wields over nature, it also produces consequences for it. Transformations occur. The young man, as a stage in man’s youth, is a creation of modern times. The bourgeoisie has pushed it to extremes, with extreme consequences: the eternal adolescent. Yet this creation extends beyond the confines of the bourgeoisie seen as a class and a ‘culture’. If young men cannot claim to constitute a social class, their character as a ‘category’ or a ‘group’ is nevertheless becoming clearer, and increasingly widespread. As people begin to live longer, as social life and the requirements of knowledge get more and more complex, so the time needed for training is increasing. But at the same time – and we have already indicated the double, contradictory, dialectical character of this process – those activities which have not been given over to machines are becoming increasingly fragmented, and increasingly quick to learn. Techniques in common usage are easily mastered. Our streets, our newspapers and our magazines are full of technical images which give the illusion of technical and scientific knowledge. The learning ability of children and adolescents is becoming a social phenomenon which is a constant surprise to adults, who in turn feel obliged to continue their own training when they see that boys and girls barely out of childhood know almost as much as they do. With the decline of the craftsman and of professional
experience, the status of maturity and seniority is on the wane, except in the spheres of high culture, the specialized sciences and advanced technicity. All it requires to handle most machines is a modicum of physical strength and, most importantly, the ability to move fast. In the eyes of many young men nowadays, work and sport have become almost identical. Youth is at a premium, yet its own particular constraints (including military service), with their double character of subordination and initiatory experience, have not disappeared. In France at any rate, military service brings a certain structure to this informal but nevertheless real group: ‘young people’ (to its masculine component, that is).

In so far as it takes place outside pedagogy as such, initiation into social life has lost its ceremonial and ritualistic character (without having completely superseded it, as studies of groupings have revealed). The individual undertakes this initiation at his own risk (which is one of the traits of the individualization process), and it is spread over a longer period than hitherto. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, with the first symptoms of what we call ‘modernity’, partial groups began to take shape, one of the first of which was young people as a group. With this new group the theoretical idea of apprenticeship appeared, together with the novel of ‘education’ (*Bildungsroman*), a new pedagogy for adolescents, and finally that surprising figure: the ‘young man’. It would not be completely accurate to state that the ‘young man’ is essentially a phenomenon of the bourgeoisie, intelligentsia or middle classes, even if those social strata did exaggerate its specific features so much that it ended up as some kind of feverish caricature. Up until that time, boys had become subject to the harsh rule of adults from the moment they cut their mothers’ apron strings. External or internalized rites of passage marked this transition, and facilitated it. Adults granted the newcomers a place within their ranks, but the price they had to pay was high. With the nineteenth century, this moment of passage becomes a distinct period in individualized life. Then things get more complicated. Henceforth there are young adults and ‘young men’, the former confirmed in their manhood, the latter arrogant but lacking self-confidence.¹ They coexist in social life and in consciousnesses, confronting or complementing each other. Young proletarians are quicker and more adept at overcoming the ‘young man’ within themselves, and becoming young adults. Students from bourgeois backgrounds find the process slower and more difficult; they are the ones who will remain eternal adolescents. The young adult already has experience of maturity, sometimes prematurely so. As soon as he can he integrates within a type of social life
(peasants, workers, intellectuals, shopkeepers, etc.). Each of these itself belongs to a social totality which is determined and limited by specific forms.

It is not our intention to explore the situation and the problems of ‘youth’ in contemporary society. What is our intention? To help destroy the myths of youth, but also to show the place this group occupies in ‘modern’ society, and the complexity of its problems.

The myth of youth, like the myth of the proletariat (and the myths of modernism in general), consists in a series of philosophical statements of a superfluous and ontological kind – that is to say, concerned with defining a so-called ‘being’. Youth is thought to have its own specific ‘being’ which can be defined by itself and for itself. It contributes its autonomous ‘values’, and much more besides: its experience – the experience granted in the instant of beginning, the experience which holds the secret of spontaneity. Needless to say, this is the opposite of the experience which is gained through accumulated knowledge. From this angle, human life would appear to be a process in which, rapidly or slowly, spontaneity and presence waste away: a squandering of youth. Acute perceptiveness, physical and emotional hypersensitivity (to the point of cynicism), a reckless, basic vitality which eschews the prudence of reason – such are the riches and prerogatives of youth.

In an ideology such as this, several elements stand out. First we see a protest against the fetishizing of accumulation – experience, prestige, knowledge, capital, economic power (whether in bourgeois society or socialist society). Secondly there are elements which appear as a consequence of the old cosmological romanticism as developed by Rimbaud – pure and violent spontaneity, which people are unable or afraid to attribute to childhood any more, and which is hived off on to the shoulders of ‘youth’ in general.

There is certainly a major problem here: how are we to recapture the natural and spontaneous life forces dislocated by the society of the machine, dissipated by the division of labour, and lost by the processes of accumulation (technology, knowledge, means of production)? Nevertheless, the vague notion of an unconditional, vital spontaneity does not stand up to scrutiny. If it means anything at all, it is that the young barbarian from the era of shepherds and nomads is alive and well, and living in the mid-twentieth century. As our preceding analyses have shown, a culture can maintain its spontaneity only by keeping in contact with the symbols and images which transmit, perpetuate and support it by constantly evoking it. Without images and symbols of a poetic order (still in the double meaning of the word: practical creativity and poetry), pure spontaneity degener-
ates to the level of crude need, which is not even the authentic need which comes into being biologically, but debased, artificial need. In this respect, when the notions of ‘nature’ and unconditional, vital spontaneity become associated, many illusions will be fostered. Because a boy (or a girl) has begun living, because the idea of happiness and pleasure seems novel, as indeed it is in terms of their individual experience, he (or she) thinks he is the first and only one to discover these possibilities, and to hold the key to their secrets. No, it is not untrue to say that when we begin our own individual history, we each of us start reliving history in its entirety. We rediscover for ourselves what others before us have discovered and created. Life, pleasure, pain, love and its heartaches, we start them all from scratch. We are reborn, and we relive the stages through which humanity passed to be born; we emerge from the limbo of nature, of motherhood and fatherhood, of family and education. But like all truths, this is true only up to a certain point. The myths of youth inflate the self-mystifications of individualism and turn them into a demagogy. But youth has lengthy cultural antecedents too. It is a conquest, a construct of civilization. The young human being could never survive without protection, and spontaneity cannot come into being – or be reborn – unless it is sheltered by education; it is education’s most refined product; it is the work of symbols at their most profound, the symbols of heroism and sensuality, of vitality, of knowledge, of art. It is all too easy to understand why the young people of modernity are suspicious of adults. Spontaneity succeeds because adults feel nostalgic about it, a feeling which verges on nostalgia for Mother Nature; they are drawn hypnotically towards it because it is something they have lost. This brutal, deafening spontaneity makes them feel curiously inadequate because they are really seeing their own weaknesses, their own doubts and disappointments. The myths of youth do not merely stem from this nostalgia on the part of older people; above all they are the product of their guilty conscience. Because flaunting and exaggerating their spontaneity comes so easily to them, young people cannot help challenging the rights of compound and cumulative experience, which they see as symptomatic of old age – or rather, as old age per se. The result is a mutual collapse of the ‘values’ which are being championed on both sides. Yet the problem for young people is to face up to cumulative experience and to confront it, without surrendering to it and without creating an absolute disjunction between what is possible and what has been accomplished. Rather than helping to resolve these contradictions, the postures of mutual suspicion which accompany this challenge merely serve to immobilize them. Relations between the generations are becoming
poisoned, like the relations between the sexes, and despite (or because of) the fact that they are becoming more numerous. The more totalized social life – in bourgeois society – becomes, the more it falls apart. It is not simply a question of the social forces – technology, science, the state – each going its own way and setting itself up as an autonomous power. The parts of society – its groups – are also responsible.

Today's educators and sociologists have observed a phenomenon which is as curious and interesting as it is disturbing: an ignorance on the part of 'young people' – greater or lesser according to the individual or the group, but always extensive – about anything concerning history.

This ignorance is not new. It is perfectly natural. When people enter the world they come into contact with their antecedents only via the narrow experience of their environment, which they will frequently rebel against: their family, the neighbourhood they live in. Their attitude towards their own conditions of existence will therefore depend upon their attitude towards their own parents, the family ethic (and whether that ethic is still in one piece or breaking up), and the influence – or absence of influence – of previous generations on these immediate relations. Knowledge of the past is a part of culture.

What is new today (or so it would seem) is that this natural and unavoidable ignorance which comes as a result of the passing of time and of generations is becoming an accepted thing, something to be proud of, almost something to cultivate. Many young people (or so it would seem) do not want to know what happened before they were born. What was once a natural tendency is turned into a decision. These young people have decided to parenthesize and ignore the past. The world commences with them – a pure beginning. Acting on a vague and vital word of command – they see it as vital, at any rate – they sever all connections with their origins. They elevate that aspect of youth which gives it all its illusory charm to the level of an absolute. They start from zero. They do not even give their elders the honour of watching them as they rise up renewed from amid the crumbling ruins. They have wiped the slate clean of everything but their own signature. Unlike the youth of the past, they do not blame their parents for all the wars, the crises, the crimes, the craziness. Not even that.

Does this absolute negation already constitute a nihilism, or is it simply the beginnings of one? Impossible to say. And it is not our intention to do so. Let us simply map out the consequences of this arrogant, virtually unmotivated indifference towards the past.
First consequence: the amazement of these young people when they accidentally come across a document about their origins. Their amazement and surprise are almost mesmerizing (What? This or that kind of thing happened, and I wasn’t there? So things weren’t so very different . . . ). Ignorant about a past which they have liquidated by a quasi-diktat, these boys and girls are nevertheless searching for a genealogy. In this past which they find so surprising, they have difficulty distinguishing the anecdotal from the essential. They will easily mistake crass vulgarization for history. Ignorance about the past does nothing to prevent the proliferation of books and periodicals about history. The two go hand in hand. This makes it increasingly easy to dramatize the past at the drop of a hat. It makes it even easier to trivialize it and carve it up like a series of news items. Somewhere within these dramatizations and trivializations we see the present. It is in danger of being engulfed by them.

Second consequence: to say that history is accelerating is a cliché. An ignorance of history is increasing in inverse proportion to this acceleration. The gap between the ‘lived’ and the ‘narrated’, between what has been experienced and what has been learned, is growing. It is something which philosophers are familiar with, but historians seem unaware of: the gulf between ‘what is happening’, the event for which no one can foresee the consequences, and the time when everyone knows ‘what really happened’, when the consequence is plain to see. This inevitable gap is getting wider as a result of some associated attitudes: ignorance and surprise, a somewhat superficial interest in history and the distortion of the immediate historical past. There are already many young people who know nothing about fascism, about the Resistance or the Liberation. This is not really their fault. They couldn’t care less, and yet at the same time they find it all very interesting. But then every generation and every period has reconstructed its own past! . . . The people who know nothing about the Resistance and fascism, or others who resemble them without realizing it, are also unaware of Stalin and Stalinism; they are strongly critical of anyone who insists on thinking that there may be one or two problems and an ominous legacy ‘over there’. They are fed cut-price versions of this past, anecdotes, clichés. They swallow them whole, and the past is there once more, like a plywood wall covered with posters. A crafty and cunning older generation is pushing young people in this direction, exploiting their ignorance, their self-assumed newness and their distorting or distorted interest in the past. In former times the Church was splendidly adept at exploiting these phenomena of remembering and forgetting, of pseudo-
renewal and pseudo-creativity. It still is, as are today’s politicians and bureaucrats. This is one of the keys to the centuries-old survival of ‘apparatuses’ and ideologies.

Yet history does not lie down and let itself be contradicted and disregarded. It is not indifferent to the interpretations which are foisted upon it, but which cannot contain it. It goes on. It goes on as it was. There is an objectivity not only of historical knowledge, but of history per se. Denied, neglected, history remains active. It cannot be brought to a halt by people who parenthesize it, and it is blithely indifferent to philosophy. The more ignorant people are about it, the more heavily it weighs upon them. So there is a new generation which knows nothing about Stalinism, doesn’t want to know, and is happy with what it sees through the distorting lens of anecdote and ideology. Fine. Does that constitute a renewal? Yes and no. These young people will never know what is lacking in their lives as a result of Stalinism. Could we call them Stalinist? Not really. Nobody can be Stalinist any more. History does not repeat itself in an identical way. And yet – yes, there is something Stalinist about them; they are almost Stalinist, more than Stalinist. They are a caricature of Stalinism, a parody. They are laughable. They should never forget the warnings Marx gave. History never reproduces itself completely. And when humanity leaves a period of history behind, a closed book, it does so joyfully, with laughter and irony.

Which brings us to the third consequence. The renewal of the generations and the self-assumed claim of the young to be a pure beginning do not rule out repetition. On the contrary. When young people think they are starting from scratch, they run the risk of repeating and starting all over again.

Although it presents some difficulties, we can see this phenomenon at work in the mass media. Someone comes up with a certain subject; it’s popular; it’s successful. Writers and producers fall over each other to use it. Audiences flock to see the films and plays which use it, people listen to the radio and watch television whenever there are programmes about it. Then, on the production side, the subject is finally milked dry. As for the public, it gradually tires of it. Interest wanes; the subject becomes a bore. It is discarded. Time goes by, and it is relegated to the past. Bit by bit it is forgotten; but on the other hand, there are newcomers: young people, new listeners, a new audience. The moment comes when the subject can be resuscitated. Someone does just that. It seems like new. And the process starts all over again. All that is needed are a few novel touches, or a new technical back-up, and people can be relied upon to find it interesting.
Even sophisticated people, people who do not forget things easily, are taken in.

In this way the mass media establish a cycle: a vicious circle, a massive pleonasm. In the end, any event could be slotted in with similar events and circulated worldwide as soon as it happens, reduced to an instant image (omnipresent) and catch phrase (repetitive), an isolated extreme unconnected with other events, unsurprising, uncreative: a massive pleonasm. Only if somewhere or other there is 'creativity' (even if it is unnoticed and unassuming), or a completely new style or 'content' which can avoid repetition before it gets caught up in the cycle of repetitive consumption, can this pleonasm be avoided.

This cycle appears to be speeding up too. It is affecting the old phenomenon of the generation gap, making it narrower. In former times the period determining the break between one generation and the next, and thus the transition from the 'lived' to the 'narrated', and then back again – apparently or actually – to the 'lived', used to be fixed at thirty years. What is the lapse of time nowadays, how many years does it take for the past to be rejected and then forgotten, with the inevitable result: the possibility for subjects to be repeated? Ten years? Five? Even less? The speeding-up and telescoping of the cycle are obvious. It is difficult to quantify accurately, as this would no doubt depend to a certain extent upon the various sectors involved: aestheticism, fashion, journalism, art per se. . . . A detailed practical or empirical study of the narrowing of the generation gap which we have presented here is surely feasible. In our opinion it would demonstrate that if generation is following generation ever more rapidly, the differences between them are becoming less and less, except for several aspects which are immediately given value and emphasis by the incoming group. These differences play an important role in a certain consciousness of being 'modern' which could be one of the illusions of modernism. We should not forget to add that phenomena of pseudo-creativity and quasi-renewal do not necessarily overshadow any real creativity. On the contrary, they should help to make us aware of it.

Let us ponder all this for a little while longer. What reason can we give for this concentration on a fact of nature – the generations, differences in age – and its apparent relation to the myths of youth? Who or what is to blame? Educational or cultural policies, with their top-heavy and ambiguous mixture of modern scientism and the so-called classical humanities? Or the population explosion, and the qualitative effect of the increasing numbers of young people? Or perhaps the rate at which technology is changing, while the essential relations
between individuals and human groups remain absolutely stationary?

In the societies which preceded our own, the dead held such an important position that there were no dead and no past history, or virtually none. In total stability, or through a very slow process of transformation, the dead lived the life of the living, vivified by ritual. There was no separation between the living and the dead. The past was perennial, ever present in hundreds of ways at the heart of the community of the living – religious ceremonies, sacrifices, monuments, ritual gestures, proverbs, memories. It did not exclude events, but it weakened their status by inhibiting a consciousness of the past per se, and consequently its confrontation with the here-and-now. Time immemorial suppressed memory. As history has advanced, so this life of the dead has shortened, as though there were an inversely proportional relation between this alienation of the living by the cosmic order of nothingness and death, and real historicity, and even more so between this ‘life’ and the perception of history per se. We should never forget how far the human world in its youth was innocent and naive, immersed as it was in the ever-renewed rhythms of nature, yet how startlingly devoid of youth it was.

Today, the reversal is complete: the ‘lived’ vanishes from the scene almost before it has been experienced; it sinks down into history and is swallowed up. The historical hems young people in, suffocating them. Young people react by challenging it, but they cannot escape it. Just as before, only in the opposite way, history becomes obscure and problematical. When history becomes too long and too encumbered, it produces the same effects as an absence of history. Once, in an ahistorical society with virtually no conscious history, nothing began and nothing came to an end. Today everything comes to an end virtually as soon as it begins, and vanishes almost as soon as it appears. But everything repeats itself and starts off again. News, that fetish of modernism, may have difficulty emerging from the historical, but it does so with great energy. As interest in it gets progressively weaker, so news becomes more rapid and concentrated, until finally, at the end of a shorter and shorter period, it wears itself out. The wearing down of news – of the historical – begins after a year, a month, a week; and the remake comes out more and more frequently. The same ‘eternal’ dramas and the same ‘sensational’ anecdotes are dished up every month and several times a month. And more often than that! Ever hastier, ever clumsier and more repetitive, the modern era is constantly involved in attempts at self-assessment, sector by sector: the novel, painting, poetry, technology. It is creating a history all its own, and a false consciousness of history, composed of overoptimistic inventories and disappointing assessments of the past, which is
increasingly confused with the consciousness of what constitutes the present.

Thus the demand for sensational news becomes translated into repetition. The all-too-well-known phenomena of saturation, of boredom, of lightning transitions from interest to tedium, produce techniques aimed at overcoming those very reactions: techniques of presentation. Ways are found of varying the way news is presented. ‘Presence’ itself, which used to epitomize authenticity, becomes a technological construct, a mystification. We have the phoney ‘new’, faked novelty (by dramatizing or dedramatizing, depending on the period and the technicians involved). Ancient and modern tend to coincide in a false knowlege and a false recognition. Facts, ideas – what ideas there are – and subjects come back again and again. No one recognizes them. Non-recognition is organized technically to combat memory and previously acquired information. The confusion between triviality which no longer appears trivial and sensationalism which is made to appear ordinary is cleverly organized. News shrinks to the size of the socially instantaneous, and the immediate instant tends to disappear in an instant which has already passed.

These confusions could not be organized without the help of highly skilled people. This is one of the reasons why certain ‘executives’ can live through incessant upheaval and survive unscathed: they know how to exert managerial control over repetition (or, to give it its official name, ‘structure’). They themselves are products of repetition. In this domain, where ideas should abound, ideas are redundant, and that is why these people are able to hang on to power.

Thus young people play a strange kind of fool’s game. They are the winners. Unfortunately, the game is ‘loser take all’.

Under their conventional form of vociferous open warfare, conflicts between generations seem to be dying out. In the most heavily structured countries, they are becoming more muffled. Maybe this means that they are more profound, but certainly not that they are more fruitful. The differences between the generations are becoming more pronounced. They are an inexhaustible source of mutual mistakes, misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Yet all the frenzied activity and the constant renewal of news are in no way incompatible with an underlying stagnation upon which they float like some phoney Saint Elmo’s fire.

The most serious way young people can be fooled as a result of this is that they should believe they are affirming themselves when in fact they are forgetting themselves. Young people may forget to ask themselves the quintessential question of youth. Bernanos wrote: ‘Every
twenty years the young people of France ask a question, and war is the reply. 'Soon, if things go on the way they are, there will not even be any need for a reply; war will go on or it will stop, and young people will not ask why. Senile repetition and triumphalist, never-ending newness will have become one and the same thing. This will be just one small feature of the massive pleonasm, of the Thing of Things.
What is Modernity?

To Kostas Axelos

1. For a long time the ‘modern’ has been seen as the opposite of the ‘ancient’. It is a word which for centuries the new and the here-and-now have used in triumphalist self-justification as a means of relegating everything that is not themselves (or that they think is not themselves) to the past. Its magic powers seem inexhaustible. Yet its meaning has changed. So let us begin this study with a very brief history of the meanings of the word ‘modern’.

In France in the Middle Ages the elected or co-opted magistrates of the towns with burgomasters (in the North) and with consulates, that is, with charters (in the South) were known as ‘moderns’. The retiring magistrates were called ‘ancients’ as distinct from ‘moderns’. The latter term involved the double idea of renewal and of regularity in renewal; elections were held according to a strict mode [modus] laid down in the charter, or according to municipal tradition.

This idea of cyclical regularity of change, and of change as a norm, did not last long. In the different sectors of social and political life, and above all in culture, the term reappears at various dates, and is always heavy with polemical meanings. To give one example: we can see that as soon as the Middle Ages came to an end, and when art and thought were about to proclaim the rebirth of Antiquity in the Renaissance, the words ‘modern music’ began to be used in contradistinction to old-fashioned music. Why? Because music was already an area on the move, an avant-garde activity, an inventive sector. From this period on, innovative techniques and experiments give music an aggressive ‘modernity’. At the end of the seventeenth century the polemical sense of the word is emphasized with the famous querelle des anciens et des modernes.

From then on, ideas and situations become more complicated. Someone who wants to be ‘modern’ in one area can appear to be ‘antimodern’ in another. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his Dissertation sur la musique moderne he was engaged in mounting a violent attack on most of his contemporaries, and his first target was
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Rameau. He uses his criticisms in order to advocate a return to antique or archaic forms of music (whereas in other areas his aim was to be the intellectual spokesman for political and social change).

Later, the issue loses its polemical edge; it does not vanish completely, but it becomes subsumed in the self-triumphalism of 'modernism' and 'modern' tastes. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the 'modern style', 'modernism' (i.e. the cult of innovation for innovation's sake, innovation as fetish) is fully fledged.

2. We can ask ourselves the following question: 'What was or seemed to be modern at such and such a date – around 1840, say? How did the young Marx perceive the modern and modernity? What were his thoughts about modernism and modernity, and how did he conceptualize them?'

It would certainly be of some interest to put his writings on the subject back in their historical context. The texts are numerous. Marx frequently penned the term 'modern' to designate the rise of the bourgeoisie, economic growth, the establishment of capitalism, their political manifestations and, last but not least, a critique of these historical facts as an ensemble. 'In modern times the French have understood . . . that the political state disappears in a true democracy.' Who is Marx referring to? The Saint-Simonians, certainly, and perhaps the disciples of Fourier as well. He continues:

The abstraction of the state as such was not born until the modern world because the abstraction of private life was not created until modern times. The abstraction of the political state is a modern product. . . . In the modern state, as in Hegel's Philosophy of Right, the conscious, true reality of the universal interest is merely formal, in other words, only what is formal constitutes the real, universal interest.

Hegel should not be blamed for describing the essence of the modern state as it is, but for identifying what is with the essence of the state. That the rational is real is contradicted by the irrational reality which at every point shows itself to be the opposite of what it asserts, and to assert the opposite of what it is.

There are two ideas in this fundamental text which need to be retained. First, Marx establishes a connection between private life, the abstraction of the state, and the generalized abstraction and formalism which invade social practice. Next he shows that the period of civilization known as bourgeois (capitalist) society is characterized by extreme separation, scission and duality; as man emerges from
material nature, everything which makes him a species-being (his essence) becomes externalized as if it were a material thing. Man and the human do not disappear; but whatever stands in their way still comes from within themselves. It is their 'other' self, their double: their alienation.

So between 1840 and 1845, Marx’s thought produces a concept of modernity. This concept is primarily but not exclusively a political one. It designates a form of the state, the state elevated above society, but also the relation this form has with everyday life and with social practice in general. The form of the state is defined as one which separates everyday life (private life) from social life and political life. In turn, the state is based on separation within praxis, just as ideology is based upon the division and fragmentation of labour. As a result, private life and the state – that is, political life – fall simultaneously into identical but conflicting abstractions. And everywhere, in every area, the irrational and the rational become separated and yet confused, the one hiding the other in a single contradictory reality which is a rational (social and political) unity in appearance only: generalized unreality. Yet revolutionary (total) praxis will reconstruct the true unity: nature rediscovered, controlled, recognized and retrieved.

There is no doubt that Baudelaire’s admirable essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ is a milestone in the history we are sketching:

And so, walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, for ever in search. In search of what? We may rest assured that this man, such as I have described him, this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call ‘modernity’.

Baudelaire brings a great innovation to the consciousness of the new. For him, the ‘modern’ is in particular the ephemeral, the fleeting; he imagines human duality as a garment in which ephemeral, sophisticated fashions are the reverse side of the eternal, its lining:

If an impartially minded man were to look through the whole range of French fashions, one after the other, from the origins of France to the present day, he would find nothing to shock or even surprise him. He would find the transition as fully prepared as in the scale of the animal kingdom. No gaps, hence no surprises. And if to the illustration representing each age he were to add the philosophic thought which that age was mainly pre-occupied with or worried by, a thought which the illustration inevitably
reflects, he would see what a deep harmony informs all the branches of history. . . . Here we have indeed a golden opportunity to establish a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the theory of a unique and absolute beauty, and to show that beauty is always and inevitably compounded of two elements . . . , on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable . . . and on the other, of a relative, circumstantial element, which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion. 

This text contains vague echoes of superficial scientism: preoccupations with time (evolutionist theories) and the beginnings of sociological research (Taine’s theory of milieu and moment). But it goes much farther. It makes connections with what was originally a musical interpretation of art in general and of human activity, and with a diffuse kind of Hegelianism which is itself linked to the musical theory of eternal harmony in temporal duality and contradiction. Finally, there is the paradoxical revelation that the modern can be identified with fashion. Reversing the perspective, and making the eternal his starting point rather than his goal, Baudelaire defines beauty as something to be captured in the fleeting instant. In fact, the term ‘fashion’ has changed its meaning. Formerly it designated regularity in change and the predictable repetitiveness of cycles. Now it has been feminized, and signifies the art of the non-professional (the dandy): unpredictable, charming, unexpected and spontaneous. It is the bloom on the skin of everyday life, the most ephemeral expression (and therefore, for Baudelaire, the most profound) of innovation for innovation’s sake. Baudelaire considered that ‘nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that time impresses on our sensibility’. Fashion and modernity are temporal, instantaneous phenomena, and yet they have mysterious connections with the eternal. They are the shifting images of an immobile eternity.

Is it not remarkable that Marx should define the modern as the abstraction and duality of modern life, while Baudelaire interprets this duality in a completely different way and uses it in an attempt to capture the distant reflection of a long-lost eternal beauty in trivial and everyday things, such as clothes, carriages or crowds?

At more or less the same moment in time, what Baudelaire deliberately accepts, Marx criticizes and rejects. Marx is forever calling on nature, lost, forgotten, split and torn apart by culture and knowledge, by the control man holds over it and by which he becomes human, nature which man must one day rediscover after transforming it through the bitter tribulations of the extreme abstraction of bourgeois society. As for Baudelaire, he engages in a polemic against
nature. Vulgar and coarse, nature drives man to eat and to kill. We must leave the realm of needs behind, and enter the realm of luxury and pleasure. The good is always the product of an art, so we should look upon clothes as one of the signs of human nobility. Woe betide those who enjoy nature and nothing else! It is in abstraction, art and artifice – in the artificial – that Baudelaire seeks the taste for the modern and the key to its secrets.

Baudelaire’s aesthetic attitude is based upon a deliberate choice. He has decided to repudiate nature, naturalism and the optimistic philosophy of the eighteenth century; Marx, however, continues and develops it. Baudelaire opts for antinature – in other words, for an art of pure creativity which will imitate nothing given or external, and will consequently be synonymous with pure artificiality. Hence his astonishing tirade against the natural woman, and his apologia for cosmetics, that conjuring trick which turns the grain and colour of the skin into an ‘abstract unity’ and the human being into a statue – in other words, a divine being superior to nature. Baudelaire deliberately sees as concrete those aspects which Marx, at exactly the same time, is denouncing as supremely abstract, as antinature, and which the poet himself – completely unaware of Marxist critique but formatively influenced, like Marx, by the revolutionary upsurge of 1848 – saw as an abstraction before proclaiming it to be concrete. Not only does Baudelaire accept the bourgeois world as a world, but he decides to use it as raw material for the work of art; he transforms it into poetry, not by stressing its antitheses – the abstract and the concrete, antinature and nature, ugliness and beauty, evil and good – but by effecting its internal transformation: its attempt to assert, amplify and justify itself through negation and self-re-creation. With the abstraction thus produced and revealed, Baudelaire will make a world, a world of poetry and art; but the endeavour is possible only because this ephemeral abstraction itself aspires to the condition of a world. It is a worldly world, the world of the demimondaine, the world of high society. Hence the apologia for dandyism, that serious game by which the poet is entranced and transformed. If the dandy is the ascetic of fashion and distinctiveness, then the poet is the ascetic of art.

By confronting Marx’s texts with Baudelaire’s we reveal two antithetical perspectives within an identical situation. During the historical period in the run-up to the revolutionary crisis of 1848, Marx was developing his theories and the fundamental Marxist project. He considered that revolutionary praxis would reduce the separations, divisions and multiple dualities by which the modern world is defined. It would transform the world by creating an alternative world, resolving
the conflicts within social life; it would begin by bridging the intolerable gap between the private and the public, between the specific and the general, between nature and man, between what happens on the level of everyday life and what happens on the level of those higher, sublime authorities: the state, philosophy and art.

Twenty years later, Marx began his scientific work. The relative failure of 1848 had made him see the limitations of philosophy, including the philosophy of praxis, which was an attempt to supersede philosophy and to realize it practically by emphasizing the unlimited negative and constructive forces of the working class. Without abandoning his programme, but adopting a more ‘positive’ stance than twenty years previously, Marx began to work on economic and historical materials; these would be his basis for formulating what was possible and what would be impossible.

Meanwhile, Baudelaire was in the painful process of revising the concept of ‘modernity’. A poète maudit, scarred by the Revolution and its failure, full of loathing for the bourgeoisie and scorn for the bourgeois world, he registered and ratified the failure of revolutionary praxis. He appropriated duality and division. He came to terms with them. He refused to accept them as such. They were not enough to satisfy him. Like one possessed, he exacerbated them, delving deep within them to unearth the seeds of an idealized transformation which would substitute for the real transformation which had failed to come to pass. And as an artist, as someone who desired aesthetic creation, as a poète maudit who spouted blasphemies and anathemas but who still had something to say and was intent on saying it, what else could he do? With Baudelaire and Baudelairean critique we see the emergence of modernism, we witness the fledgling concept of modernity beginning to take flight; but a black stain sullies its brilliance. It is not simply that the poet is in mourning for the death of beauty. He is also aware that something else is missing. It is not that God is absent, or dead, but something worse: modernity is like a shell to hide the absence of praxis in the Marxist sense, and its failure: revolutionary praxis, total praxis. Modernity reveals this lack. Modernity will be the shadow cast on bourgeois society by the thwarted possibility of revolution, a parody of revolution. Baudelaire’s work can be understood only in a diabolical or parodic light. The new as abstraction, born from abstraction and disguised as something living and materially human, and triumphally proclaimed as such, will be the ideological and idealized substitute for the practical revolution which never took place. Baudelaire’s narrow praxis will use words to work on images and symbols, employing representations and fantasies to create a tolerable (idealized) fictional world
within the intolerable world of the real, and this derisory praxis will replace total praxis, which would not simply have interpreted the world, but would genuinely have transformed it. Baudelaire’s work can be understood only as a provocation and a challenge. It says something other than it appears to say, something much more extreme. It accepts bourgeois society as a ‘world’ only so that it can fill that world with terror, defiance and derision.

So Baudelaire’s poetic works and the entire tradition they fostered appear in a new light. Marx thought of the modern world politically. He made all areas of knowledge subservient to political knowledge, which he linked to a programme of action, to the idea of unitary and total praxis. As for Baudelaire, he tried to think of the modern world aesthetically, making all types of action and knowledge subservient to art. He both accepted and rejected the rifts and divisions he observed at the heart of the real, between himself and the real, between the real and the ideal or the possible. On the basis of his decision to be creative, he uses the real as the given raw material for his poetry, and in so doing he gives unwarranted importance to a second-degree abstraction, literary language. This he tries to endow with extraordinary powers: not the power to imitate or represent reality, but the power to transfigure it, and even to be (to be the real, to be human materiality). Poetic language aspires to be a world, to be the word which will create a world. Poetry and the poem as object – an assemblage of words – are proclaimed as the key to the enigma of the world – the human world and the supernatural world. Soaring above the abyss of the human heart, above the chasms of the cosmos, dispensing with all beauty which already exists, the poem will be the transparent object, the self-sufficient crystal ball in which the world will be exemplified by its own pristine reflection. Poetry proclaims the primacy of language, its possible perfection, its self-sufficiency. It is in and through creative (poetic) language that duality, division and disjunction will be resolved. The ideal and the real, the abstract and the concrete will be reunited. At last the word will become flesh, at last the word will be palpable – palpable flesh become the living word. It is the word as magic, as alchemy.

Baudelaire’s literary language does not differ significantly from spoken language, and from that point of view it does not present us with problems, but it does imply certain technical elements which will tend to make aesthetic discourse a specialized language. It is a discourse which vibrates with a disturbing inner tension, a call of defiance which summons the reader as an accomplice. Beyond temporality yet slaves to circumstance, aesthetic discourse and writing aim to reveal and transform the world. They unveil mysterious
correspondences between language and dreams and the world, but language alone is effective. Language alone produces the construct and the sought-for transformation. Language is. Alone.

Thus Baudelaire’s poetry inaugurates a pathway for poetry and modern art which Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé and Valéry (to name but a few) will later pursue. In these poets, and in poetry since Baudelaire, there is a demented hope which is disalienating in terms of the everyday life they reject, and the bourgeois society they despise, but alienating and alienated in all other respects. It is a powerful hope, fruitful yet ineffectual: the hope of turning the abstract into everyday reality, since everyday reality itself is nothing more than an abstraction. Poetry works on a different level to the novel, and goes much further. The novel accepts the everyday; it narrates it. It takes it as its object, as an object. Poetic language aims to transform everyday reality. This operation has a double character. The everyday is rejected, in the process of this rejection it is ‘born into language’, and language is made an absolute. But once it has been fetishized in this way, language becomes an object of doubt and anxiety. The shadow of eternal silence falls on the word, threatening it, enshrouding it.

3. Thus we have isolated the elements of a schema which could be formulated as follows: from the end of the nineteenth century onwards language *per se* becomes foregrounded in culture, in the name of a poetic or creative intention, a subjective and abstract intention which works on abstraction *as though* it were concrete (and aware initially of the magical character of the operation, the word as alchemy, then gradually losing sight of the original aim, the wish to create, the paradox and the challenge, until finally the end-product becomes accepted as something sufficient in itself).

The increase in the status of language does not endow the arts of verbal language with the same primacy and power of motivation enjoyed by music in the pre-romantic and romantic periods, with their great theory of harmony. It is not the arts of language which are foregrounded but language *per se*, with the result that it becomes the paradigm for all the other arts. These are conceived of along the lines of language, as partial and technically specialized languages: painting, sculpture, music, and so on. Thus the conception which began with poetry becomes generalized for all the arts. It spreads from one area to another. It affects painting, sculpture, music, and so on. One by one they accept abstraction, treating it *as if* it were concrete and qualifying themselves as languages, as types of writing, integrating other technical or practical elements into the ‘structure’
thus defined and generalized. It even affects knowledge and philosophy, though somewhat later, and these become the study and the science of discourse per se.

To put it another way: language, that implement and essential medium through which social practice is born into consciousness, through which man names himself and seeks himself, that tool of action and disalienation, becomes something alienating and alienated, and its role is immense and ever-increasing. Through all the superfluities of verbalism, through the magical illusion of the word (the world renewed, the new life, aesthetic transformation via the word), language takes on substance. It becomes reified, an extreme example of alienation. Now that it has become a supreme good, it can be traded, like so much merchandise. It can be bought and sold. It becomes hardened, something external to the living word. When it is not commercialized, a pure aesthetic language (be it literary or non-literary) functions outside of those concrete communications in which something specific is done and said and transmitted. Beautiful language, artistic style and aestheticism are merely the end-products of an alienation, the alienation of the logos, and the artist has become the high priest of the logos, its magus, or simpy its mandarin.

Inevitably this extreme state of affairs is not without its clashes and backlashes. Because language has been thought of as an absolute, and because that assumption has failed, we begin to distance ourselves from it. We can see it, we can get to know it, we can change it into an object, but at the same time it begins to break up. Its inadequacies become apparent. It is not the human absolute. Doubts about language are part and parcel of the fetishizing of the logos, of discourse, of communication and signification. Granting words magical properties produces denials and negations which will tend to dispel this fetishism, but not to resolve the problems it conceals. Language is no longer seen as the perfect medium (for communication) but as a deficient medium incapable of mediating (of communicating) the immediate (the lived). It is not transparency, it is obstacle, opacity. It does not deliver reality, it distorts it. And the moment we think that it can create anything, and that it can transform the mediocrity of life into something beautiful, is the moment we realize that beauty is dead. The verbal (or aesthetic) transfiguration of everyday life leaves living reality intact, regardless of whether symbols have been used or whether symbolism has been eschewed for the coherence of discourse per se. If we expect that by expressing life the word will generously endow it with some kind of plenitude, we will be disappointed. At the most it describes the mediocrity of the way we live. It fails to show us the way towards freedom, and neither the
philosophical nor the aesthetic word has been able to supersede its own abstraction. The word cannot be made flesh, and the word as alchemy, that philosopher’s stone of modernity, was first and foremost a prolific source of empty verbiage.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, we see an increasing number of attacks on discursiveness (Bergson, for example). Soon a kind of stuttering spontaneity (Tristan Tzara and Dadaism) begins to challenge scholarly language and the art of discourse. How can the word hope to rival the grandeur and profundity of this silent scream? Now that the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign has finally been recognized, it becomes possible simultaneously to study language in a way which raises its status to that of an essential structure and the model for all structures, and to mount an active critique which will degrade it by submitting it to a whole range of abuses, until it disintegrates in a process of absolute negation.

This upgrading of abstraction to the status of an absolute acts as a substitute for a real life ‘appropriated’ by total praxis, and leads to a crisis for language. Does this crisis characterize modernity? Is it crucial? Without rejecting such a hypothesis, we would note that we find it difficult to be satisfied with a purely cultural definition of modernity and its crises. Nevertheless, certain aspects of such a definition merit immediate examination.

One explanation goes as follows: when the nineteenth century (to use this rather crude ‘periodization’) – that is, the period of free-trade capitalism – came to an end, culture and art were experiencing a major crisis. The century was dying in the belief in its own decadence, in the belief in decadence per se, and totally indifferent as to what its specifically determined historical or social causes (i.e. bourgeois society) might be. The theme of decadence is found not only in French literature of the time, but also in Nietzsche, where it plays a much more important role than in French thought, which restricted it to the aesthetic and literary level (the fin-de-siècle movement), and was more concerned with representing an exaggerated refinement and an extreme and excessively civilized artificiality. This explanation is accurate, but misleading. It is certainly superficial.

What really happened on the cultural level was a weakening of the word as fetish; art saw itself as pure creativity, but it did not understand – or had forgotten – what ‘creativity’ meant, and a crisis had ensued. A period of modernity, inaugurated by Baudelaire, came to an end. But not so the crisis itself. On the contrary, it still had some shocks in reserve for the years to come. It was to continue, more profound, more extensive than before, but with the addition of some new
elements which would help to modify it. With the twentieth century a
new period begins: our era, the era of imperialism, revolutions and
wars.

4. In and around 1905 (why that date? because of the first of the
Russian Revolutions, the symbol of the period which is about to
begin) the contours of modernism and modernity begin to emerge
from the mists of history, and we can observe them as they move
towards us. They issued from a Europe numbed by several decades of
(relative) progress, (relative and limited) well-being, and (bourgeois)
euphoria. This tranquillity, the tranquillity of the _belle époque_, was
short-lived. Yet there were no noisy ceremonies to usher the new
period in. It arrived insidiously, slipping in by the back door with a
series of little events and minor symptoms. This explains why it lagged
behind conceptually, particularly in the domain of philosophy. Even
the most lucid and vigilant 'minds' of the day had difficulty in under­
standing what was happening and in predicting what was to come.
Their evaluations were based on a superseded past, their prognosti­
cations used nineteenth-century ideas. They imagined they were
keeping abreast of things, but in reality they were dragging their heels
in the rearguard of events, completely blind to the transformations
which were taking place. The fact that the new period did not elimi­
nate the contradictions of the old rendered this blindness all the
easier to live with. Indeed, rather than eliminating the contradictions
it exacerbated them, and added to them on its own account.
Imperialism was already taking shape in free-trade capitalism. Yet it
also introduced innovations. The analysis and overall picture of these
phenomena which Lenin produced as a result of his readings of
Hobson and Hilferding are too well known for us to recapitulate
them here.

1905. A mutation. Technological inventions proliferate, despite
the latent or overt Malthusianism of those in power. Technological
progress witnesses an intense escalation, in which armaments, the
threat of war, then war itself (consumption on a colossal scale, a stim­
ulant for production and technological research) – in a word, the
mutual defiance of rival nations – all play a determining role. Sooner
or later everyone who tries to stabilize the knowledge and givens of
action, and social and political life, will have the ground cut from
under their feet.

These new technologies (which in the main are applied to the art
of warfare) begin to penetrate everyday life: electricity, the internal
combustion engine, cars, planes. At the same time, the exploration of
the physical world on both the micro- and the macro-levels reveals
dimensions which have long been suspected, represented and imagined, but never fully grasped. At the same time the age of individualism draws to a close, and the age of collective organization begins to impose itself, but without making an absolute break. The individual will struggle vigorously to defend himself and to establish an effective bridgehead: art, the imaginary, the relative.

With the new period comes an upsurge of discontinuity, slow but overpowering, influencing knowledge, behaviour, and consciousness itself. The previous period had championed the concept of continuity in all areas, taking it to its most extreme conclusions and extrapolating outrageously. It had accepted the adage that 'nature never moves in leaps and bounds' as an axiom and an eternal truth. The contrary adage, proposed by Hegel and Engels, that 'nature only ever moves in leaps and bounds' was virtually unknown. It would appear that in terms of methodology and theory, fundamental notions never completely disappear until they have been exhausted. The dominant mechanism in nineteenth-century science was founded on the study of continuous trajectories. Evolutionism borrowed its schema from the study of the mathematical continuum (adding a few variations of its own) and applied it to natural history. In turn, sociology and the philosophy of history applied the evolutionist schema to social man. Finally, psychology – both empirical and Bergsonian – insisted on the unity and continuity of the 'self', using divergent hypotheses to explain and accommodate it. Attempts to establish a philosophical picture of the world were organized around this concept of continuity.

During the new period the role of the specialist becomes overwhelming, and even in attempts at methodology, clear-cut distinctions are established between areas, sectors, regions and factors. Becoming is sharply periodized, and even well-proven concepts – the concept of 'process', for example – are discredited, and have remained so to this day, when some are finally being rehabilitated. Unperceived or poorly understood by Marx in his day, the notion of structure begins its brilliant career, reinvented by physicists and linguists. Discontinuous structures and distinct units are found everywhere: atoms, particles, genes, linguistic elements, phonemes and morphemes, and so on. Language becomes the remarkably efficient medium by which these concepts of discontinuity, structure, type and form pass into general usage; they have two requirements to satisfy: they must enter into discourse, but they must also help to explain discourse. Here again we see the new period grafting itself on to the old, while adding something very new of its own.

The differential schema (the incrementation of infinitesimal variables) becomes of secondary importance in the representation of
becoming, and is overshadowed by concepts of mutation, sudden change and qualitative differences. As a result, questions about the stability of systems, types and temporary or permanent balances are posed in a new way.

From the avant-garde point of view, encyclopaedism appears outdated and synthesis positively old-fashioned, but this will not discourage the specialist from feeling the need for a general culture, or the cultivated public from expecting a systematic picture of the world. This leads to some curious misunderstandings. Philosophized and systematized, Marxism–Leninism will arrive just in time to fill the gap left when bourgeois thought abandons rigorous theory as a requirement. Marx’s directives about supersession and the realization of philosophy by total praxis will be all the more blithely disregarded as a result.

How should we interpret these changes and this massive injection of discontinuity? Is it an increasingly obvious sign that the age will be a tumultuous one? Or a renewed attempt to dialecticize fundamental concepts, incomplete and one-sided as yet, but moving in the opposite direction to the previous attempt? Or an upsurge in the analytical thought (understanding), the distinctions, dissociations and separations which had been effectively paralysed during the belle époque by the bourgeois vision which fetishized continuity? Were they the methodological expression of new discoveries? These interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The essential thing for us is that discontinuity and the consciousness of discontinuity have effectively entered into modernity, with all the problems that implies for becoming.

The abstracting powers of discontinuity and discontinuity as an abstraction affect even physical perception. ‘Reality’ changes. Abstraction becomes palpable and the palpable becomes abstract. The ‘real’ loses its old familiar features; it falls into pieces like a plywood jigsaw puzzle; it becomes simultaneously reified and derealized. Signals, those technological inventions of industrial society, invade the streets, work and leisure activities, everyday life (always slowly, always surely). Signals help to depreciate the value of symbols, and to replace them; they act as regulators in social behaviour; they assemble modes of behaviour which are essential if the individual is to circulate ‘freely’. Photography, cinema and advertising all help to proliferate the spread of images, smothering walls and cramming consciousnesses with stereotyped messages and debased symbols. Fixed and artificial, electric lighting makes the city and its monuments, roads and streets stand out sharply against the natural environment: countryside, sky, space. Electric lighting emphasizes the features of the urban landscape more
starkly than gaslight (which had played a significant role in forming the nineteenth-century myth of the city). In this way antinature becomes a social milieu, and pitches camp in the modern city. Henceforth, the way objects are perceived offers a powerful and volatile mix of palpability and abstraction, of contents and forms, of entities without absolute referents. Within this reality an alternative reality emerges, another world within our own. What alternative reality? What other world? Technology and control over nature. These are present in the palpable world, and yet absent from it; they are both present and absent for the sensibility which sees itself at the mercy of certain pre-existing things, and tries to define itself without being clearly aware of the technological referent by which it is determined. This alternative reality and this other world have a double aspect. They are perceived as something within the real, in immediate space and time, but also as something other than the real: adventures, explorations and departures in distant space and time. The ancient symbolisms derived from age-old visions of the world, and still present either palpably (churches, monuments, works of art) or merely as representations (words, received images of nature and man) are stripped of their value. They surface again unexpectedly in psychology. Deprived of symbols, men feel at the mercy of things, of signals, of sounds. And indeed they are. They are also at the mercy of symbols which have lapsed from the social into the unconscious psyche.

In art, some artists reveal the way the abstract and the concrete, and antinature and nature, have interpenetrated each other, and their works are attempts to grasp the presence of discontinuous signs and signals within the palpable world. They deliberately replace perceived continuity by constructed discontinuity, making room for a freedom which will be (or will assume itself to be) pure creativity. They mould the signs existing within the palpable world into a language, into writing. Other artists remain aware of the strangeness of the real world and of its ‘otherness’, and try to journey within or beyond it; by superseding alienated reality they will attain alternative realities, and rediscover those age-old symbolisms which long and bitter centuries of fragmented labour, technology and systems of signals have shattered, but which, like it or not, still form the dimly perceived foundations of our consciousness. Their texts will use symbols rather than signs.

As we have already suggested in the letter of the Sixth Prelude, modernity was born of these important changes, an apparent but as yet unexplained presence. Contemporaries had the impression that an aesthetic and scientific revolution was taking place in parallel with political revolution. Some believed that the one would lead to the
other; others that it would render the other superfluous. The most active moment of the period begins in and around 1905 (with Apollinaire, Cendrars, Max Jacob – Braque, Picasso, Analytic Cubism, etc.). This means that it predates the First World War by a few years only, that it reaches its peak immediately after it, and after the Soviet Revolution, and that it comes to an end between 1925 and 1930, with the twofold stabilization of capitalism and the proletarian revolution.

At the heart of this newly revealed modernity are inner contradictions, principles of destruction and self-destruction. Two major tendencies emerge, primarily in literature, which deal explicitly with the unresolved problems left over from the previous period: the search for a lifestyle, geared towards symbolisms and the invention of new and liberating symbolisms – and the desire to produce constructs, and to make style subordinate to them. Both these problems were already inherent in Baudelaire. We would suggest that now they become distinct tendencies, and we would name André Breton and Max Jacob as being most representative of the former and the latter respectively. Because both tendencies have revolutionary and anti-bourgeois ambitions, and because they are contemporaries, their mutual antagonism is fought out on shared territory. Their contradictions are symptomatic of an unavoidable outcome: they will destroy each other in an inevitable explosion of mutual self-destruction. The problem of the relation between the work of art and life, between the exceptional and the everyday (and the problem of superseding their dissociation, and consequently the problem of the possible fusion between what used to be art separated from everyday life, and everyday life devoid of meaning and beauty) is a fundamental one; but as yet its presence is superficial, and not envisaged in practical terms. It remains ill-defined and unresolved. Then, in 1917, Tzara and Dadaism take the child modernism and inject it with the serum of negation and radical critique, seizing art and the fetishized work of art and shaking them vigorously, and dispelling the fetishization of language, which still played the leading role in all this drama. Dadaism is like a hypodermic jab in the nerve centre of modernity, and the profound and exquisite pain of its needle-point is the prelude to its demise.

But let there be no mistake. It would take us a very long time to come up with arguments to support (and refute) these hypotheses. Today the act of retrospection has a programme of its own. These programmatic guidelines present a critical history of modernism; they involve neither an apologia for modernity nor an attack on it. What we are attempting is an overall analysis. The idea that modernity could somehow bring about the perfect consummation of
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History is surely as dubious as the idea that as a result of the decline of the bourgeoisie, the decline of Western civilization or the demands of industrialized society, there could be such a thing as absolute decadence.

The creative ferment begins and ends, the modern world is torn apart, and all this finds expression on the privileged and revealing level of art (and of philosophy, too, and although this is equally symptomatic, if less obvious, we will disregard it for the time being). And it is here and thus that the urgent need for supersession becomes apparent. Artists destroy art, art self-destructs, and this destruction takes place principally on the level of language (in art); all this has been virtually achieved. In terms of politics, and on a global scale, the dialectical contradiction threatens very dangerous consequences: namely, that the powers involved will end up destroying each other. This situation is an extraordinary one, and it is crucial for us to examine it. Although supersession remains a necessity (something we will return to), the word itself has almost lost its meaning, such is the violence of this mutual challenge. But so far as art is concerned, when it destroys and self-destructs, the only damage is the havoc it wreaks on the consciousness and sensibility of individuals. How is the rift between style and construct, between the exceptional and the everyday, to be superseded? We do not know when or how this supersession will take place.

5. Modernism and the concept of modernism are profoundly different things. In the same way, subjectivity and consciousness differ in all aspects from knowledge – direct or indirect, certain or uncertain – which uses the harsh rigours of analysis to bring its concepts to maturity. Modernism is triumphalist, it projects its own self on to the misty horizon where the clouds of possibility are gathering. Nowadays the feeling of the modern is very similar to the impressions described by Baudelaire, except that he inverted them. In his understanding, fashion and the modern were virtually indistinguishable. What is different a century later is not the increasingly frequent appeals made to nature – appeals or recollections, nostalgia, remorse, forgetfulness, it is not clear which. What is different is that everyone knows that all fashions will eventually become unfashionable (and that sooner or later every fashion comes back into fashion, and more and more frequently, since the series of forms is limited – but that is something people are unaware of, or choose to be unaware of). In the abundance and redundancy of objects and constructs, people know that time is operating an extremely rapid process of selection. But what they do not know – and they all know that they do not know it – is
what will stand the test of time and what will not. It is a tragicomic sit-
uation, and one where the anxious or complacent admiration which
is evoked lends itself marvellously to exploitation by speculation and
advertising. The lasting and the ephemeral are indistinguishably pre-
sent in fashion and the modern, and only an uninterrupted scientific
reference to history could possibly tell which was which; such a refer-
ence is impossible, despite the efforts of ‘the critics’, who spend their
time obstinately and fruitlessly thinking of the present in terms of his-
tory when they should be using critique to examine it.

‘Modern’ consciousness is made up of equal parts of certainty and
uncertainty, seriousness and superficiality. It imagines itself to be the
antechamber whence classics emerge. So art and culture blindly come into
line with knowledge and technicity, where the innovative and the
controversial either rapidly integrate into existing structures, or sim-
ply disappear. Anything which appears to be able to outlast its context
of novelty becomes a classic, and more and more rapidly (at any rate
in France, where the fetishizing of classicism is getting more pro-
nounced with the passing years).

Returning to a theme we have formulated previously, we would
like to emphasize how extraordinary the careers of some contempo-
rary writers, novelists, poets and dramatists have been. They begin
with negation. Negation is the only way open to them: antitheatre,
antiplays, antiliterature, antinovels and antipoetry. Unaware of what
the roles and rules involved really are, they take it upon themselves to
bring about the dissolution of art. At first their goal is the withering
away of art. Unwittingly they help to formulate the fundamental ques-
tion of the supersession of art and the everyday, and their fusion. But
very soon they become successful, and start growing up. It is time to
be positive, time to be truly creative, time to forge ahead. It is time to
write real plays, real novels, real poetry. Negativity is vanquished. They
have seen the light. The demonic principle has been defeated. The
way ahead is clear. They have found their true selves, whereas before
they were something other than themselves. And by this act of self-
betrayal they achieve a feeling of harmony, and even of community
(with the public).11

In the same way – and rather paradoxically – our ‘modernism’
contains two aspects which at first glance might appear to be incom-
patible: an overexaggerated cult of the ever-changing here-and-now,
and a neoclassicism. This is a reversal of Baudelaire’s attitude, but at
the same time it takes it to its most extreme conclusions. The sense of
the ephemeral and the taste for abstraction are negated. The instant
is no longer the shifting reflection of a distant eternity, but the very
threshold of the eternal.
‘Modern’ is a prestigious word, a talisman, an open sesame, and it comes with a lifelong guarantee. The success of advertising campaigns which use it are an indication of its perennial status (be ‘modern’, do this or do that, use such-and-such a technology, such-and-such a car, such-and-such a make of television, etc.). But if we ask what it means, no answer is forthcoming; indeed, it is a word which we are not even permitted to question. When we utter the words ‘modern times’, ‘modern technology’, ‘modern art’, we think we have used terms and expressions which mean something, whereas in fact we have said nothing at all. We have merely pointed out an inextricable confusion between fashion, the here-and-now, the ‘valid’, the lasting and the contemporary. In the midst of such confusion, the word has changed meaning several times over. In the way it is used at present it does not refer explicitly to anything definite or meaningful. Yet one or other of its meanings will always dominate, and in a curiously unconscious way it will penetrate our consciousness.

There is perpetually something new – to a greater or lesser degree – in the different sectors of social practice, knowledge and consciousness. Moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, these sectors are volatile. Social practice has its leading, avant-garde sectors – its ‘homing devices’, to use a modern metaphor. Inevitably, we expect that time will be the judge of whether something is genuinely new or not, and whether it is going to become an integral part of existing developments, or simply disappear. In our modernism – and this is what makes it original – one innovation seems as new as another, and while we are preconditioned to give them all the benefit of a favourable reception, they are all governed by a margin of uncertainty and chance. One of the most arrogant features of the new is that on both an emotive and an intellectual level it manages in some obscure way to give the impression of being synonymous with creativity. As soon as this impression is imprinted in the forefront of our consciousness, time, which is always one step behind the point spearheading the operation, comes up from the rear and ‘validates’ the novelty. Since our attention is always drawn by the brightness of the spearhead, the operation itself remains ill-defined, inexplicable even. The activities which take place (or are assumed to take place) at the spearhead of ‘creativity’ move forward in a kind of ambiguous mist – not completely opaque, but far removed from the transparency of rational thought. In this murky atmosphere, the people who are active and productive, the people who create (more or less well, more or less consciously) do so by projecting the imaginary reflection of their own activity on the fogbanks ahead, like a lurid will-o’-the-wisp dancing round the spearhead. A spectrum analysis using certain specific
techniques (an analysis of documents, newspapers, literary works – frequency word counts – the isolation of systems of meaning, etc.) would reveal something highly complex: a certain awareness of bad conscience and false consciousness, a lot of illusions. These many-sided illusions are composed of exaggeration, dramatizing, propaganda, and a great deal of ambition on the part of individuals to wield control over other individuals, and on the part of groups to wield control over other groups. This flickering ignis fatuus dances to a soundtrack of noises, murmurs and singing, and the effect is of a film in which ‘modernism’ is the triumphalist and self-glorifying star.

What follows is a kind of intellectual and cultural terrorism, itself part of a vaster and more generalized terrorism, since every area is ravaged by techniques and procedures of intimidation and propaganda perpetrated by bureaucratic hierarchies and mandarinate. Modernism is determined to impose itself, either without discussion or by being deliberately controversial. It presents its twofold credentials: novelty, imminent access to classicism. Propaganda for modernism is projected in metaphoric form in newspaper articles and radio and television programmes, and its aim is to intimidate. Anyone who does not accept it and dares to challenge it is made to appear and feel old-fashioned, out of date and not ‘with it’. This widespread terrorism works in various ways. It intimidates not only the general public but also the genuine or self-styled avant-garde, whose greedy and ambitious factions live in dread of not being top dog. Consequently, a highly active snobbery surrounds modernism. The actual ‘creative’ struggle is irrelevant, it is being seen at first nights that counts. This snobbery is forever on the qui vive, pressganging recruits for modernism militant. It helps to create the metaphor by which each period defines itself, and at the same time it makes that metaphor acceptable. Another consequence is that the modern is tapped at source, at the moment of birth – were it possible, even during gestation – and distributed through specially dedicated commercial pipelines (private art galleries, advertising agencies, for example). Everyone who produces anything knows this. Whether they are genuinely ‘creative’, active participants or just passive, phoney receivers, they all act accordingly. From this perspective, journalism, the press, impresarios, advertising moguls and ‘the critics’ all form a vast apparatus for spawning the ‘modern’, harnessing it almost before it is born and circulating it as just another consumer article.

And so our modernity casts its own shadow, a modernism which has nothing in common with knowledge and is far from being a genuine consciousness. However, it is not a deliberate and systematic hoax. Bluff is one of its tactics, and the game is poker, not chess. It is a bran
The only way to isolate one element from the other would be to undertake an a posteriori spectrum analysis of each period, each tactic and each moment.

Modernism is represented by unfocused projections and blurred images which fail to produce a clear concept of it. On the one hand, they act as a barrier to the concept, blocking its formation, prohibiting reflection about it and even the awareness that it is necessary. On the other hand, they contain the elements which are essential if the concept is to be formulated. Once more we would stress the difference between immediate consciousness and knowledge, between representation and concept. The gap which separates them is the space in which radical critique operates.

6. This is the moment to say what modernity, our modernity, is not.

As a form of life and consciousness, it is not entirely 'valid'. Its form of consciousness contains as much mystification as those contemporary forms of consciousness and life which make no claim to be 'modern' but see themselves as traditional, run-of-the-mill, or simply trivial, bourgeois, or petty-bourgeois.

Could it be defined as a 'structure', or the basis for a structure? Could it eventually become something stabilized and fully defined? No. Analysis has shown, and will go on showing, that it contains deep-rooted contradictions. In fact, our era is constantly searching for a definitive stability and coherence with reference to certain socio-political notions and plans for action based on those notions, but without success. These pivotal notions are of class and of nation. Plans for political action, for tactics and for strategies emphasize first one and then the other of these crucial notions, and in neither case are they ever self-sufficient or successful. Sooner or later the plans have to be referred back to the notions, and vice versa, and the two end up being inextricably mixed. Efforts to 'structure' historical becoming in relation to class alone or nation alone taken as absolutes prove useless, mere tactics and strategies which apparently foreground class to the exclusion of nation, or vice versa. In reality, they take both into account by evaluating their relations of strength. Modernity is best characterized not as an already established 'structure', nor as something which clearly has the capacity to become structured and coherent, but rather as a fruitless attempt to achieve structure and coherence. Everything leads us to the conclusion that structures are being 'destructured' even before they have gained a coherent internal stability. They are then integrated within new systems which
themselves are already threatened by contradictions and negativity. Everything leads us to the conclusion that it is impossible to represent the 'world' as having a realizable structure and a possible stability.

Modernity cannot be defined as an idea or a horizon (to be more precise: as a ‘horizon’ beyond the ‘horizons’ which would be revealed one after the other). Such a definition confuses modernity with the ‘worldwide’, and presents the modern as the world in the process of becoming realized – captured, as it were, at the moment when it can be seen appearing over the horizon (or from beyond a limited series of horizons). This stab at a definition substitutes one vague term, the ‘modern’, by an even vaguer one, redolent with contradictory glamour: the ‘world’. But only when we supersede it can the earth be there in front of us like a ‘world’ or something ‘worldwide’. Man is already leaving his terrestrial ‘world’, and the terrestrial seems like a ‘world’ to us only because we can leave it – first in our imagination, and then by means of technology. Thus, like all ‘worlds’, ours reveals its finiteness and appears before us as something finite. It is shrinking smaller and smaller in the infinity of space and time. It enters the realm of representation, as a sphere, or as a trajectory spiralling through space, but without offering us something precise from which we might deduce specific models for action. Therefore we must be careful how we use such emotional formulas, with their representations which are based more on images than on concepts. It is the definition of ‘modernity’ which will allow us to form a precise definition of the ‘world’ rather than vice versa. Let us begin by trying to grasp what is closest to us. Sometimes the ‘world’ seems like the deceptive and triumphalist image which a certain ‘modernity’ projects ahead of itself to disguise its crises. As a concept, it reveals contradictions, confusions and crises at every turn; whereas as an image, it appears cleansed of all contradictions, pristine and seamless, covering its crises up, or triumphing in them when and only when they can be usefully exploited. The sociology of representations and images alone is insufficient; we also need to undertake an objective analysis which will help us to formulate the concept.

We have just indicated an element of this concept. The ‘worldwide’ is being seen as the modern equivalent of the universal. We challenge this. However, we insist upon the need for a general concept of modernity which would be valid for all countries, social and political regimes, and cultures. We make a distinction between the general and the worldwide, but the vague image or notion of a ‘world’ does strengthen our hopes for finding a general concept. In a word: a concept.
7. If we are to think of our modernity as something more than culture or the symptoms of culture (art, poetry, language, etc.), one method alone is available: the discovery and conceptualization of the essential contradiction or contradictions. This method, which is fairly well known under the name of ‘dialectic’, is not easy to use. Generally, contradictions come in tight knots, in closely woven textures. How are we to grasp the threads which will lead us into the fabric? Usually, if not always, we end up cutting them off. But let us be wary of such metaphors. In truth, the contradictions are dialectical movements which knowledge attempts to grasp, fully aware of the fact that these movements are interconnected (another metaphor: a river), and that knowledge operates by a process of separation and immobilization which kills movements dead, and uses techniques operated by conceptual apparatuses such as analysis and logic, etc.

Certain contradictions in modernity are experienced experimentally, that is, immediately. They lie on the surface of social practice. As a consequence they seem self-evident, but they also rapidly lose their profundity, reduced as they are to the ‘semantic field’, to antitheses between words or attitudes, to trivial complementarities. They are useful as the raw material for literature, and even for journalism. Appearing on the surface of consciousness, and passing into language (something which is both helpful for knowledge and a hindrance, since the passage into language cannot take place without a weakening of more deeply engrained and ‘unconscious’ conflicts), these contradictions become psychologized or sociologized. Instead of drilling away deep below the surface, they appear subjectively as part of individual, group or social consciousness.

Here are a few of the contradictions which, with the above-mentioned reservations, we may take as characteristics of our modernity.

Anxiety, anguish and the feeling of loneliness are on the increase. This leads to an incalculable number of objective signs being expressed or interpreted subjectively. Is this new? In what respect is it modern? The impression of loneliness is not new. Anxiety and anguish have been put into words many a time and, not so long ago, most powerfully by the romantics, who saw themselves as ‘modern’ in their own times. Could the new and the modern of today be defined by the intensity of such forms of consciousness and the way they are expressed? But let us go beyond impressionistic ideas about the individual psyche and how it expresses itself. Surely what is new and genuinely ‘modern’ is the contradiction between individual loneliness and the bringing-together of crowds or masses in gigantic cities, in massive business companies, in vast offices, in armies, in political parties. Here we witness the conflict between a certain ‘atomization’ of
life (unilaterally denounced a hundred times over) and an over-organization which hems life in, and doubtless requires it to be atomized as a necessary precondition. *The socialization of society* goes on unabated. As the networks of relations and communications get more dense, more effective, so at the same time the individual consciousness becomes increasingly isolated and unaware of ‘others’. That is the level on which the contradiction operates. We must begin our analysis by grasping both aspects one by one, seeing them as antithetical. Once the dialectical movement has been caught, the drama is revealed: separation and totalization, the former working on the individual and his life, the latter made effective by means of the state, the global society, communications, norms, culture, etc.

Continuing in this direction, we soon discover (or, to use a rather more dramatic vocabulary, we ‘unmask’) some equally harrowing conflicts. In no other era has so much well-being been made available to so many human beings, albeit in limited amounts (those who profit are a minority of individuals, families and groups in a minority of countries). The bourgeois concept of comfort as accepted in the nineteenth century has been superseded. No other era has so clearly promulgated ‘well-being’ as an ideal, by proposing it as the ideal goal for all mankind. The need for security seems primordial, even if it is still difficult to formulate and define. Security is the key element of ‘well-being’. In so far as ‘well-being’ can be seen as a lifestyle, security is its first condition and its crucial quality, much more so than material comfort and mass consumption. In a wide range of different areas – health, work, education – it is clearly a prime aspiration. At the same time, no era has been so exemplary in its extreme cruelty (although certain periods in the ‘prehistoric era’, which is what Marx calls history, were pretty extreme!). There is no horror which this era – our era – has not shrunken from contemplating: genocide, mass exterminations, wars of destruction, great political purges, displacement of peoples, etc. Comfort and ferocity are the two contrasting panels of an extremely bizarre diptych. The need to be secure and insecurity, symbolized by the nuclear threat, go hand in hand. Our era is trying to eliminate the tragic, while all the while it is sinking deeper and deeper into tragedy. Ours is an age in which violence is out of control, and which no longer wants to hear about violent passions, probably because it has had as much of them as it can take. Timid, it shelters behind conformity and triviality. It displays a smile as its emblem. It finds reassurance and inner cleanliness as best it can, idolizing good humour, niceness and sociability, and flying the flag of convenience of a friendly smile.

Certain sociologists have tried to define modernity more positively;
for example, by mobility: mobility in terms of technology, social mobility (constant change in the relations of individuals to one another, and between individuals, places and labour), intellectual mobility (the assimilation of changes in knowledge and practice), moral mobility (the need for extreme flexibility and adaptability in interpersonal activities and relations, made necessary by the factors of change).\(^\text{12}\)

These sociological analyses emphasize several genuine traits of modernity. However, in terms of the dialectical analysis we are undertaking here, they remain one-sided. What our analysis is most concerned with is the contradiction between the demands of mobility and the general preoccupation (on all levels) with stability, security, structure, ‘structuring’, and equilibrium. And surely the resultant conflict is more essential than either of its two sides taken in isolation. In revealing it we become aware of an even deeper apprehension. What is the cause of this unending disturbance, with all its contradictory characteristics? On all sides the process of becoming is faster, ever more precipitous. And on every side men are facing destiny, which once again has ousted the gods of prayer, with the desperate plea: ‘Stop! Leave us alone, whole, in peace. Please don’t destroy our planet, please don’t destroy anything at all! Let us live our lives. Leave us in peace! . . .’

And there are other contradictions we need to consider. Up to a certain point, our era has secularized questions of sexuality. The anathemas and interdictions imposed upon sex by the Catholic and bourgeois tradition have been lifted. Sexuality has passed into language, which presupposes and contributes towards the raising of its taboos, without actually solving any of its problems in praxis. The notions of ‘sin’ and ‘purity’ have disappeared or been modified. Moreover, a long-awaited and apparently impossible – but in fact possible – disjunction between love (sexuality lived on the human level) and reproduction (on the level of biology) is slowly entering social practice. Man’s control over the forces of nature and his own nature has to undergo this disjunction; through it alone will man be able to appropriate nature and his own nature. Sexual need can no longer be characterized as a need, and modern man finds himself face to face with that imponderable force, desire, which is born of need yet is as different from it as one ‘world’ is from another ‘world’ in the same universe. Modernity is an endeavour: the discovery and appropriation of desire.

This is the first element in the contradiction. Now let us examine the second. This ‘modern’ endeavour to control need and appropriate desire is constantly faced by a barrage of demoralizing protests.
One of the most surprising of these protests was the one raised by official Marxism. Obsessed by the wish to control (physical) nature and the external world, completely oblivious to the authentic Marxist vision of appropriation, and motivated exclusively by ideological and political considerations, these institutionalized Marxists condemned the conscious control of biological fertility along with the idea — and goodness knows, it is a simple and sensible one — of family planning. The result has been a new moralism, and needless to say, it has quickly found an institutionalized haven. A united front has been established between certain institutionalized Marxists and certain orthodox or nonconformist theologians. As a result of their collaboration, a new moral order has been created. The problem of desire — which poets have perceived and which only psychoanalysts have treated rationally, albeit in terms of the abnormal — has been obfuscated by a smoke-screen of theoretical and ideological waffle about Eros and Thanatos, Eros and Agape. Bit by bit, sexuality, and the language of sexuality, is being reconsecrated.

Unfortunately, there is worse to come. The as yet insecure control of consciousness over the biological has had the practical result of producing a moral crisis. It is easier and easier to satisfy needs, and many people are able to dispense with desire, as though desire were synonymous with constraint, and with all the symbols and images evoked by long centuries of constraint. Modern love is seeking a middle way between instant satisfaction, which would eliminate passion, and pointless, desperate passion per se, between brute pleasure and abstract eroticism. To seek freedom by means of antinature and anti-spontaneity is a path fraught with dangers. The inevitable rift and separation between the biological and the human produce a painful result: a coldness — or, not to mince words, a generalized and appalling frigidity, especially among girls and women, of course, but it affects men too. Woman’s road to freedom is via frigidity, or worse: faked passion. As for men, never have they been so insecure about their own virility. Doctors, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have their work cut out dealing with the problem of frustration. The rift between sexuality and fertility, which is a specific result of the attempt to control nature by means of abstraction and antinature, goes hand in hand with a second disjunction; it is not new; it is a legacy of the Catholic and bourgeois era; it gets worse in proportion to the attainment of freedom and the scale of the effort involved. The sexual act becomes liberated from pleasure, and becomes in turn an abstraction.

By bringing the secrets of sexuality into language (in other words, mediating them by practical rationality) psychoanalysis has trained a spotlight on a relatively irrational aspect of pleasure. Without wishing
to cast doubt on the normative qualities of such analysis, we should not forget that the principal thing demonstrated by the success of psychoanalysis is the extent of the problem involved. The various failures and disappointments also serve to prove how inadequate the language and discourse of psychic mediation are for resolving these problems. Sometimes the use of discourse to heighten awareness of conflicts does not help to supersede them, but simply makes them worse. The solution is to be found in a praxis. It is self-evident that the problematic situation the modern Eros finds itself in can only be, and certainly will only be, provisional. It is a period to be lived through. But could it be avoided? If techniques were improved and better adapted to practical use — that is, to praxis — then perhaps the conditions for spontaneous vitality could be reconstituted. However, there is every indication that before a possible — but momentarily impossible — unity can be rediscovered, the disjunction between the self and itself, as well as the disjunction between nature and abstract antinature, will have to be lived through till the bitter end. Modernity is doomed to explore and to live through abstraction. Abstraction is a bitter chalice, but modernity must drain it to the dregs and, reeling in simulated inebriation, proclaim it the ambrosia of the gods. Abstraction perceived as something concrete, antinature and a growing nostalgia for nature which has somehow been mislaid — such is the conflict lived out by ‘modern’ man.

And here we enter into the fabric, into the heart of a skein more like the coils of a snake than the warp and weft of threads. Let us grab it at random, catching on to whatever does not slip through our fingers. How strange the contradiction is between the modern ‘reprivatization’ of everyday life, and the ‘globalization’ which is being thrust into the very heart of private life by the mass media! On one side of the picture the horizon shrinks, with everything turned back on to the family and the self. Turn the picture, and we see a limitless expanse where the idea of the ‘world’ already implies its supersession. But this ‘picture’ cannot be summed up simply as something with two contrasting sides. It is misleading to think that we can look at one side, then the other. The crucial thing is to seize the dramatic and conflictual interpenetration of each ‘side’ of the picture. And the picture is just a metaphor for a technical operation, itself abstract, by which the movement from one to the other can be grasped.

On the one hand, we are aware of an immense disillusion with ideologies. They all disappoint, distanced as they are from reality and powerless as they are to confront it, concealing realities which differ from those they represent, and all in the service of vague and dubious enterprises: advertising, propaganda, agitation, tactics. Empiricism is
becoming widespread. Tactics and strategies are becoming important in prognosticating how effective a given ideology will be, and this is precisely why no ideology can ever last for long, since they are all judged according to their effectiveness rather than the amount of truth they may contain. In politics as elsewhere, tactics and strategies have their own formal rules and laws, independent of ideologies. At the same time, ideologies have not completely stopped being effective. Far from it. They are becoming more extreme. Religious ideology, for example, is becoming a factor in social, political and moral life; there is hardly such a thing as faith any more, in the traditional sense of the word, but people still gather together on the pretext of religion. There are institutions and organizations powerful enough to force ideologies into social practice, even when people mistrust them and treat them with contempt or irony. By offering consciousness its only means of self-expression, ideology becomes language. Individual and social consciousness finds itself trapped between scepticism and the need to use ideology in order to say anything. How could this consciousness not be torn apart, before knowing it or without knowing it? And that is the worst type of duality there can be. There is no greater alienation than the alienation which cannot speak its name.

On all sides we can see people bent on achieving sensual satisfactions. Some are content to appropriate objects (i.e. simply to satisfy needs by possessing material goods, something which often involves art, or at least some kind of aesthetic endeavour), while others are determined to appropriate subjective powers (i.e. the ethical search for a lifestyle). This generalized but disjointed determination is condemned to remain on the level of determination and aspiration – never desire – and it oscillates from one side to the other before it sinks back either into the comfort of possessing things, or into some narcissism or other. It has to make do with the transformation and abstract transposition of an everyday life which has itself been reduced to a ‘private’ abstraction: verbalism, rhetoric, moralism, aestheticism, or else images of a marvellous and unattainable life offered during leisure hours by cinema and television. The determination to attain sensual satisfaction proves as futile and vacuous as the will to power. It pursues its object and, in destroying it, eviscerates itself. The more it shrivels up, the more embittered it becomes, and the more disappointing.

There is a proliferation of interests and centres of interest. How many fascinating things there are, how many fascinating people, and objects, and subjects! Never before has news been so fertile, so full of surprises. How does it come about that when something is interesting,
boredom is always lurking in the background? How incredibly swiftly does the one turn into the other! The sociology of boredom could well disclose an important aspect of modernity. . . .

And now we are back again with young people, and the young as a generalized world problem. Everywhere we see them showing signs of dissatisfaction and rebellion. Why? It is because they themselves are new, and thirsty for innovation – that is, modernity – and are therefore experiencing all of modernity's unresolved problems for themselves. Their finest qualities are the ones which cause them the most pain. Their vitality exposes them and makes them vulnerable. Attracted by it, yet repeatedly disappointed by it, they live out the 'new' and all its empty moments. It is they who are worst hit by the disjunction between representation and living, between ideology and practice, between the possible and the impossible. It is they who continue the uninterrupted dialogue between ideal and experiment. Young people experience these distances physically. Over here, God and justice disguise injustice; over here, revolutionary ideology disguises reformist and bureaucratic practices; over there, Marxist ideology, which once promised to transform lived experience, conceals an infatuation with a high technicity which is extending its sphere of application into the distances of space. Young people try to protect themselves from nihilism; but who can tell if nihilism will not be born precisely from this defence against the tendency towards nihilism? Yet – and this is a general point – young people are starting from scratch, or think they are, but in fact they are continuing history, and they bear the burden of the generations they have repudiated. Could the crisis of the young, and particularly those who want to be 'modern', be a characteristic of modernity? Apparently so. A crucial one? No. There are reasons for this crisis, causes and motives behind it, and we need to establish what they are.

8. This brings us to the political contradictions. And here we are really spoilt for choice.

When the so-called 'ex-colonial' or 'underdeveloped' peoples manage to achieve national independence, we can understand their predicament. The 'masses' always believe they are starting out on a new life. Liberation brings freedom. We who are aware of the irony of history know that these peoples are beginning the process of accumulation. They imagine they are leaving the darkness of slavery for the pure light of day. They think their problems have all been solved, when in fact they are just beginning: in the birth pangs of accumulation. Certain choices will be made, certain strategies adopted, without the people who fought for freedom of conscience being informed.
Perhaps they will become aware of the options only when it is too late to turn back, and they are caught up in an irreversible process.

What is to become of these new states, constructed by peoples whose only way of attaining freedom is to create that organ of constraint and oppression, the state? For them the state is part and parcel of economic development, perhaps even its forerunner, whereas in at least some Western European countries it was its end-product. Which model will they adopt – the Russian, the Chinese, the Yugoslavian? Or the illusory American one? Will they invent new pathways? At what cost? What ordeals will they have to face? They will have to move fast. And if the history of which they are about to become a part is lenient where crimes are concerned, it never forgives a mistake. Will these peoples create new bourgeoisies, linked from the start with the apparatus of the state, with bureaucracy, with the army? Will they be able to leap straight from tribalism to socialism?

The sphere of conflicts they are entering will almost certainly be extremely violent. They will be obliged, and are already being obliged, to come to terms with what they have given up. Today they will have to assimilate the very things which yesterday were instrumental in their servitude: science, technology, and all the ideas and ideologies which they drag along in their wake, although they have been superseded as such: rationalism, positivism, scientism. These ideas and ideologies are frequently incompatible with the cultures, traditions and identity of nations and peoples who are forced to adopt them. And there is also the necessity for markets and market production, the inevitable fetishizing of things, of money, of merchandise, the terrifying potency of overorganization. This is the stuff major conflicts are made of. These peoples move forward, impelled by destiny – that is to say, by the demands of their own successes, an amalgam of necessity and freedom. Where are they heading? Under what banner? On this level, chance and the aleatory would appear to play an important role, if not the most important role of all.

In France and elsewhere a quite extraordinary contradiction keeps cropping up at every step of the way, so to speak. Depoliticization is rife; it is reaching the masses, particularly in the most highly developed industrialized countries. Not even the labour movement is spared, nor the specific working-class organizations (trade unions, etc.). It is frequently attributed to a profound transformation of society, with the consumer society (production organized for the market) having taken over from blind production or production for production’s sake. This theory is unacceptable. Marx has already analysed this view of consumption, and demonstrated how its appearance disguises the essential point, while at the same time revealing it: the
relations of production. Even if the appearance has become more real and solid (every appearance contains a modicum of reality), the relations of production have not gone away. Quite the reverse: it is possible to demonstrate that the ‘consumer society’ is steered by the class which owns and controls the means of production. It is nevertheless true to say that today’s industrial protests are frequently cut off from political action. The former can be vigorous, while the latter is feeble. It even happens that large groups may persist in a given political (and revolutionary) ideology while acting in an economic and reformist manner. Why? Among other reasons, because working out how to formulate demands and organize collective action is becoming more and more complicated. Labour organizations have their own experts, specialists and technicians who liaise with the representatives of the employers, of the state, and of capitalism generally, in order to examine complex problems. Thus the masses leave everything in the hands of the people in control. Infiltrated as it is by specialists and technicians, the labour movement is gradually being saturated with technocracy and bureaucracy.

But the problems involved are increasingly of a political nature. What an extraordinary dialectic: the solutions often call into question decisions of a general order, or institutions. It is not simply a question of problems over wages in a given factory or business, but problems involving the distribution of the national revenue, and consequently the management and direction of the economy, of investments, that is, ‘strategic variables’. The problems are also of a kind to threaten the right to own land and capital. Peasant organizations which see themselves as ‘apolitical’ call for measures limiting or modifying capitalist ownership (or, historically speaking, feudal ownership) of the land. The decisions underpinning such demands are clearly of a political nature. Students who claim to be ‘apolitical’ demonstrate against the Algerian War. As part of their corporative demands they call for measures which would also overturn existing structures (a complete overhaul of the education system, wages for students, etc.). Moreover, these individuals and groups are beginning to suspect that these aspirations and problems are all linked, yet they go on insisting that they are not politically minded.

Could we see the apolitical attitude simply as a phase in the process of disillusion, an appearance, or just as the result of ignorance? Is politicization a deep-seated need which is waiting to pass into language and consciousness? How is this need suppressed and disguised? Does it require some effective form of practical and political action to repoliticize a given sector, or a given area of opinion or social practice, which has been temporarily depoliticized? Will a crisis of the regime
in France bring about some kind of global repoliticization? If so, will it be sudden or gradual? Is it a question of building a strategy and putting it into action? To reinvent a daring and totally revolutionary policy – is not that what we need to do? And to reinstate Marxist thought in all its breadth, with the aim of radically transforming the human world and everyday life in all its aspects, in order to stimulate the imagination and political sensibility – should not that be our aim? Or conversely, should we turn back to a reinforced parliamentarianism, and start politicizing economic and social questions on the level of the state?

Here, as elsewhere, one question just leads to another. Only a lengthy and meticulous analysis could produce answers – perhaps. We are by no means sure that by analysing the present we can completely clarify the future – in other words, we cannot be sure that the future can be entirely predicted by analysing the present. Can there be any doubt that once it has come to pass, the future – what is possible – will appear determined? Yet it is no longer admissible to accept determination and determinism as synonymous.

There is no doubt that socialism is possible. And in so far as it is a possibility, it is still on this century’s agenda. For scores of years now, opting for this possibility has made practical sense. It is a required option for individuals and whole groups, whatever the conjectural or subjective reasons behind the choice: economic reasons (wage claims, demands for more rational organization), ethical reasons (humiliations, desire for dignity or justice), cultural reasons (the dereliction of existing culture), or specifically ideological reasons.

The imminence of socialism and the urgent need for it are evident everywhere, and palpably so. Society is becoming more and more socialized. Economic and social relations are proliferating, and overflowing the frontiers separating one country from another. The massive developments in communications and the ‘consumer society’ are creating an equality of needs and aspirations, perhaps even of sensual satisfactions, and these are just a few aspects of the socialization of society. It is proceeding regardless of prevailing political regimes, and ever more rationally. It is entering into language, and in doing so it confronts existing language with an increasing number of connections within praxis, in a manner so complex as to defy expression in words. Already the socialization of society appears to be a fundamental sociological fact (which justifies sociology as a science while requiring a careful critique of its fragmentary results and its frame of reference). On the other hand, in capitalist society, the contradictions at the very centre of the socializing operation are becoming increasingly intensified. But these are masked by ideological and political
appearances which have come into being precisely as a result of this intensification (for example, the confidence that the state will be able to arbitrate, and resolve them). In this bourgeois society of ours, the seeds of economic and social planning, which are an inevitable part of an organically socialized and centralized society, have great difficulty in germinating, and are constantly under threat. As for the proletariat, its class boundaries have never been strictly defined, and now they are vaguer than ever. It has annexed new social strata: peasants, technicians, office workers, intellectuals. These are precisely the categories which pose political problems in a non-political way. To conclude: the social forces capable of making socialism a reality do exist.

For these reasons and for many more besides, which it would be futile to list, socialism is not sinking to rest beyond the horizon; nor is Marxist thought. It is asserting itself, and confirming itself as a possibility and an urgent requirement. It is not simply that the idea of socialism is still with us. The means to make it possible are there within reach.

Having said that, what is socialism?

Currently, socialism is being defined, quite correctly, in the following way: the expropriation of the bourgeoisie in so far as it is the class in possession, and its elimination in so far as it is the dominant class in control. As a result of a political and social act, in one historic leap, socialism will take the ownership and management of the major means of production away from the bourgeoisie.

Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – this definition is purely negative. It is necessary, but inadequate. It offers only a partial answer to the question posed. If we accept it, it will in turn raise a whole range of problems.

Basing itself on what Marx genuinely thought, the initial Marxist programme offered – or appeared to offer – a clear reply to the question of what socialism is. The total revolutionary act would inaugurate an equally total and conscious praxis; it would bring the prehistoric era of mankind to an end, along with all the alienations (in their order of succession and mutual support: religious, ideological and philosophical, political, economic). In one leap, revolution would take us from blind necessity to freedom, from scarcity to abundance. The proletariat would disappear along with the bourgeoisie, negating itself by negating its class antagonist: disalienated, restored to the spontaneity and authenticity of nature, which would be rediscovered and controlled. In a word: appropriated.

Despite what is frequently said, there was nothing messianic or eschatological about this initial project. It predicted a decisive action,
it announced a total revolutionary praxis. In this respect it contained an active utopianism, an effective action and the idea of that action. And it was open to two interpretations. Marx’s writings show that he envisaged what was humanly possible in two ways: *ethically* (the transparency of social relations, the mutual recognition of individuals and groups with relations which would be rational, and recognized as such) and *aesthetically* (pleasure in goods and desires intensified to an unlimited extent, the enjoyment of a world prefigured in art and based upon the fusion of art with a radically transformed everyday life). It is incontrovertible that the initial Marxist project went much further than the mere aim of satisfying needs and ensuring that they would be overcome and rendered socially coherent, no matter how numerous they might be. It went further than mere enjoyment – or even unlimited enjoyment – of products; in other words, much further than the ‘consumer society’. Moreover, it left open the question of supersession and its double perspective.

Interesting though theoretical interpretations of Marx’s writings on the future of society may be, their importance is dwarfed by the urgency of the political problems by which the tactics and strategies of the revolutionary movement are determined. In France’s possible socialism, who will manage the means of production taken from the bourgeoisie, and how? Who will take the decisions, with what information, and under whose control?

Stalinists and Neo-Stalinists persist in the belief that the political party – the Party of the working class, unique in principle – will govern the controls in every sector and on all levels of social reality. Everything they think or do seems to gravitate around this point of view: the Party omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and identified not only with the executive and the legislative, but also with administration. So they persist in defining the passage to socialism and to historical transition (or the ‘leap forward’) in an absolutely political way: seizure and control of the state, and the subsequent strengthening of its powers. Theorists say and write that the revolutionary leap forward will come as a result of an intense class struggle, and that it implies the destruction of the machinery of the bourgeois state and its replacement by a proletarian state, as well as the socialization of the major means of production. Now this definition would effectively follow along the lines suggested by Marx and Lenin, if it were not for a lack of precision on one vital question: will this proletarian state be constituted in such a way as to make its withering away inevitable, and immediate? Yes or no? And yes or no, will the Stalinists and Neo-Stalinists make up their minds whether or not to speak out about this fundamental question in the definition of socialism? Where do they
stand? Do they think that the theory of the withering away of the state is old hat and worn out (in spite of policies of decentralization in the Soviet Union), and that the new state will become stronger, and with it the dictatorship exercised by the Party in the name of the proletariat? Or do they think that it is not certain when the withering away of the state will begin, and that it has been put back to some vague date in the distant future? Or that it will depend on world circumstances? Whatever the case may be, these adversaries of revisionism are themselves revisionist measured against the theories of Marx, Engels or Lenin, for whom the proletarian state is a state which has begun the process of withering away, which can do nothing other than wither away. And how will it be forced to do so? By the removal of the social management of the socialized means of production from state control (and from the hands of experts, technocrats or representatives delegated by the working class and set up like the state in a sphere of control above society).

The so-called revisionists are attacked and reviled by the ‘orthodox’ (who in fact – and here the ironist can simply revel in the deeply subjective and objective irony of history – purport to be undogmatic) for defending the following thesis: that in the advanced industrialized countries the socialization of society Marx described is such that it is now possible for the means of production to be socialized, and for social management to be introduced at different levels – locally and territorially (communes, districts), by units of production (industries and branches of industry), and finally, on a global scale. So far only Yugoslavia offers a model for this social management – tentative as yet, but real and perfectible. But for purely political reasons, the dogmatico-revisionists refuse to recognize that Yugoslavia can offer developed countries a socioeconomic model for building socialism.

Moreover, it is quite true that as soon as it is emptied of its political content (dictatorship by the proletariat, increased democracy, the withering away of the proletarian state) the notion of socialism is considerably diluted and weakened. It ends up as just a series of vague projects for economic planning and democracy. Of course, economic planning is an important element of socialism, but in these circumstances it becomes the be-all and end-all. The same fate awaits the other reforms (including the political, economic and social elimination of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class) which together constitute a coherent system for achieving revolution. A whole series of confusions and compromises opens the door wide for a reformism which is incapable of instigating reform, ushering in neocapitalism, ‘popular capitalism’, and the ‘consumer society’, that is, propaganda for monopolies. The distinctions between state capitalism, monopolistic state
capitalism, state technocracy, state socialism and socialism all become blurred.

The polemical exchanges between the so-called revisionists and the dogmatists have tended to confuse the issue. Too frequently they have lacked a theoretical foundation and a precise terminology, and have mingled differing levels of reality (economic, political, ideological, social, national), jumping indiscriminately from one to the other. Generally speaking, these interminable arguments have aped the ups and downs of political tactics, and taken pure and simple propaganda as their criterion.

The more we reflect on the problems we have raised, the more serious they appear. Once the means of production have been taken from the bourgeoisie, what use will be made of them? Will the moment come when the French working class will at last enjoy the patiently awaited fruits, the moment of harvest, of sensual satisfactions, free leisure, access to a renewed culture, pleasures, a transformed everyday life? Or will we just go on perpetuating the historical process of accumulation begun in France five centuries ago? If so, to what end, and how? And if not, why follow an organizational model which is valid for countries which are just beginning the process of accumulation?

But despite all this, the historical situation which gives these questions and arguments their context has a sense, and the plethora of question marks reveals what it is. Modernity — our era — brings the aleatory into the very concept of socialism. When all is said and done the nearer a possibility approaches, the darker the shadow it casts.

But bit by bit a hypothesis is emerging, and its specific form and content are gradually taking shape. We will present it in the form of a question. Then we will examine and challenge it.

9. Would not the essential characteristic of modernity be the aleatory which is invading every area and penetrating consciousness in the form of questioning?

This hypothesis needs immediate clarification. Subjectively, questions about the future can never be answered with any degree of assurance, and for that reason they introduce uncertainty in and for consciousness. Objectively, the aleatory is not to be confused with non-determination and absolute contingency. Only a completely unphilosophical mind could interpret the notion in a non-determinist way — in other words, by using a non-determinism as a substitute for bankrupt and mechanistic determinisms. The aleatory is not the event which arrives out of the blue, unconnected with the past, absurd and irrational. By the aleatory we mean the dialectical unity between
necessity and chance, where chance expresses a necessity and necessity expresses itself via a network of chances. For many years metaphysics was embroiled in an attempt to resolve the contradiction between the necessary and the contingent. Then, as Engels saw it, 'in opposition to this view there is determinism, which passed from French materialism into natural science, and which tries to dispose of chance by denying it altogether'. Faced with these conceptions, he came up with some new proposals: 'that the accidental has a cause because it is accidental, and just as much also has no cause because it is accidental; that the accidental is necessary, that necessity determines itself as a chance, and, on the other hand, this chance is rather absolute necessity'. The objective laws of historical, economic or social determinism have always been oversimplified and backward-looking. For example, the law according to which the future is determined like the successive positions of a mobile object in a fixed and pre-calculated trajectory.

The notion of the aleatory, already inherent in statistics, probability calculations, and in their application in all areas, has recently become more concise. Information theory is becoming the starting point for precise reflection on the relations between the actual and the possible, and the statistical notion of probability is one of its cornerstones. According to information theory, it is the unpredicted and the unpredictable which bring new information. Without the input of something different and surprising, knowledge and reality continue moving forward in a kind of inertia (redundancy). Newness and surprise are quantifiable, at least when they are composed of combinations of signs (repertoires) which are not a repetition of previous combinations. Repetitions and repertoires are necessary for the construction of intelligible messages. Yet repetition by itself can only result in triviality and banality. At the other extreme, an entirely unpredictable and disorganized sequence of signs would be meaningless. Between these two extremes lies the field of information theory, the exploration of the range of possibilities.

This theory takes up an old problem. There can be no becoming without something new, but newness makes an absurdity of becoming. The aim of information theory is to rationalize (attain a rational knowledge of) becoming. It quantifies variety and surprise, that is, (relative) contingency. It predicts the unpredictable per se, calculating it and discovering its (relative) laws.

The absolutely aleatory would correspond to a completely non-determined, pure problematic. This pure, absolute problematic would negate itself, since it could never formulate any explicit problems. There would be no more terra firma. The future would yawn
before us, totally perturbing. It is difficult to distinguish total openness from total closure, since neither leaves any room for knowledge and action. Pure problematic and dogmatism have many points in common, notably a certain abdication of thought and praxis.

_Could the introduction of the aleatory on a massive scale in all the areas of consciousness, knowledge and action be an essential characteristic of modernity?_ The thesis is plausible.

One of the results of man's control over nature is that he begins to be aware of the aleatory. But this awareness does not leave him powerless and resigned. He integrates the aleatory so that it becomes part of his consciousness and his actions. The new is always surprising, but as long as its newness is not intolerably new, it becomes part of established structures, balances and self-regulating processes (in technical terms: feedback, scanning, homeostasis). If not, regardless of whether these structures be physical, biological or sociological, they will become shattered and incoherent.

The controlled sector is getting wider. The amount of irrationality _per se_ is diminishing. On the other hand, any effective action entails a sort of wager: a gamble, with stakes and the risk of losing. Paradoxically, this knowledge of the aleatory reduces the chances of error or failure by eliminating the need for actions to be overprudent and extracautious. Once it has been conceptualized and understood, the aleatory can become useful. But it cannot be controlled, like some kind of mechanical force, and it cannot be eliminated. Such is the message of the theory of strategies, games and decisions.

The aleatory dominates modernity. The old statistical paradoxes have become colossally important. We do not know who will get married, who will die, who will be born, but we do know approximately how many marriages, how many births, how many deaths there will be. I do not know if I will get cancer, but I do know what the odds are of me getting it, or of whether I will die five years hence, or ten. The odds of me having a car accident are calculable, and so on. On a world scale, the threat of atomic destruction is an obvious and particularly dangerous symbol for the aleatory in modernity.

The social sciences even find themselves obliged to take a secondary aleatory into account. Probabilities can be calculated only in relation to possible choices. This presupposes that the range of possibilities is determined and objectively measurable, and that subsequently it will become necessary to opt subjectively for one or other of them. An absolute and entirely necessary option would no longer be an option; it would be made without a struggle and without risk. Necessity is the place where possibilities and the necessity for opting meet. We can make an objective assessment of possible choices.
and a subjective one of projects and frequencies of choice, but this does not mean that all possibilities could be equally capable of solving the problems posed by real life. We must take into account the fact that every possibility contains risks, otherwise it would no longer be a possibility. Action tends to make a given possibility impossible, rather than to confirm a determinism and bring a pure necessity to full term.

In other words, any questions about the future lead to further questions. Moreover, we must make sure that the questions are the right ones: they must address real problems and possible solutions.

10. In the old-fashioned days of continuism and determinism, the notion of *process* was central. It is not the equivalent of the notion of determinism. A ‘process’ can contain contradictions and risks. As a concept it avoids being mechanistically determinist, while at the same time it emphasizes a certain determinism seen as an essential element in a dialectical movement.

One type of process Marx revealed seems particularly important: the processes of *accumulation*. Marx was concerned above all with economic accumulation. Using the demands for investment in industry as an analogy, we can generalize the notion, and apply it to rational knowledge, memory, technology and technicity. Marx left us a model process and a model for studying it in his analyses of economic accumulation, which he saw not only in terms of its historical conditions, its implications, its demands and its consequences, but also as something with saturation factors (checks, balances, bottlenecks, the theory of crises, etc.). One cumulative process he rather sidetracked was demography, where the growth curve is modified by breaking and saturation factors which replace accelerated (exponential) growth by a so-called ‘logistical’ curve. Another feature of Marx’s model is that the process of accumulation is dependent upon social and historical conditions. He emphasizes the importance of the ways in which the relations of production and property under capitalism check growth. In particular, according to Marx, bourgeois society puts both a limit and a brake on the invention and application of technology. Instinctively or ideologically, or both, bourgeois society is Malthusian. Marx examines two aspects of a single cumulative process, technology and investment, and tries to determine the interaction between them. He considers that in bourgeois society, the former is dependent upon the demands and limits of the latter, and that both are dependent upon the interests of the bourgeoisie and its inherent tendency, as a class, to conserve a certain internal equilibrium, cohesion and structure.
Today, in the second half of the twentieth century, although not all the checks, balances and bottlenecks have been eliminated, the processes of accumulation have been reinforced. They are thus even further removed from those elements of human reality which are not cumulative: the rhythms and time cycles which are still linked with nature – affectivity, immediacy, private life, emotivity, spontaneity, symbols and symbolisms. A description and an analysis of the effects of this desynchronization can be found in our *Critique of Everyday Life*.  

Secondly, the dependence of technology upon the economic and social dimension, as indicated by Marx, seems no longer to prevail. The situation has been reversed. The relative importance of the elements within the global process and the mutual relations between one process and another have been modified. The economic and social dimensions, and social structures themselves, are now dependent upon technology.

How has this important modification come about? Marx’s analysis remains valid for a specific period, and essential for any understanding of modernity, yet it must now give way to a new analysis and a new account. Why is this? The answer involves the whole of contemporary history.

When Lenin led the October Revolution, he had a range of goals. His strategy had several simultaneous aims: to set off the revolution worldwide, to smash the imperialist front at its weakest point, to resolve the specific conflicts within Russian society, to break down the barriers hindering Russia’s social development, and to strengthen the country economically by a complete overthrow of the political superstructures. For Lenin, none of these aims was mutually exclusive; on the contrary, each one would follow by implication as a consequence of another. We know that things turned out quite differently, and that by a violent simplification imposed on the Revolution by the way history unfolded, Stalin reduced these aims to a single goal: Russia’s economic growth via the process of accelerated accumulation, despite the country’s industrial underdevelopment.

In this way the Revolution became unilateral, and affected only one country. The differences from the initial Marxist project are considerable. It is not simply that today revolution takes place only in the ‘underdeveloped’ countries. In the developed countries, and even in countries where revolution has allowed for rapid growth, the need to transform everyday life is being put to one side. What changes to everyday life there are remain very limited, and changing everyday life is no longer the final objective of the Revolution, but the means by which growth can be achieved and accelerated – that is to say, the goal
and the criterion has become to speed up the economic process of investment and accumulation. Ideology systematically confuses growth and changes to the way people lead their lives, just as it mixes man’s control over external nature with the appropriation of his own nature. It is above all on the socialist side that the situation the Marxist project wanted to overthrow has altered, but without being radically transformed. In certain respects it has even got worse. The global process is still something beyond man and his real, social, everyday life. It is becoming increasingly autonomous. The specific powers of social man are still beyond his reach, and he perceives them as external constraints. They are not uncontrolled (because there is such a thing as planning), yet they are alienating and alienated, reifying and reified.

The dialectic of history has taken a new form. The fundamental contradiction between capitalist and socialist regimes has a profound effect on both: it modifies the one and the other, and makes the one modify the other. Anyone who maintains that they have evolved as two distinct, specific and autonomous entities with nothing in common except their mutual antagonism is either a political moron or a propagandist. The concept is non-dialectical. If the pressures of capitalism have modified socialism, the reverse is just as true. The contradiction is not without its unity, but this does not mean that the two elements are in any way synonymous. Socialism has forced capitalism to ‘adapt’, and to introduce elements of economic planning. It has shaken the bourgeoisie from its self-satisfied slumber and its technological Malthusianism; it has jolted bourgeois stupidity, it has made the bourgeois less idiotic and more fiercely combative. But above all, for the bourgeois, capitalist West, the mutual East–West confrontation has replaced the role hitherto played by internal competition. The bourgeoisie has been unable to maintain its Malthusian ideology, particularly in practical terms. Not without regret, not without nostalgia for Malthusianism, and even though they have often found it very inconvenient, bourgeois employers and leaders have been forced to look for growth and expansion, and to take concomitant measures.

Armaments play a very important role in this stimulation of capitalism – not only as a market for big industries, but as a necessary practical result of policies based only partially on economic planning. If they are to deliver the arms ordered by the state and the military, industries must be co-ordinated, and production can no longer be shared out haphazardly between the companies and the branches of industry involved. But that is not all. A tendency which has been in evidence since the turn of the century is becoming increasingly prevalent. The search for military supremacy involves the immediate
introduction of new technologies and the continual obsolescence of existing ones. Sometimes a considerable number of materials and methods of manufacture are obsolete even before they come into service. The speed at which investments are worn down by moral (and social) wear and tear is getting incredibly rapid; as a result, both highly specialized technological research and investments on a colossal scale are required. But as Marx has shown (and the theorists and practitioners of political economy have had to accept his thesis), investments are stimulating for the socioeconomic system as a whole. Continual upheaval in production increases economic buoyancy, reduces the risk of recession and occasionally reactivates the old rhythms of the classic period. To feed these investments, new monetary and financial procedures have been introduced on a state level.

Thus, via the East–West contradiction, the process of accumulation has become a worldwide phenomenon. It is this contradiction which has led to the introduction of new needs, new productions, new products. The technological factor used to be subordinate, but now it predominates. The process of accumulation is becoming essentially the accumulation of knowledge and of technicity. Everything would lead us to believe that since the cumulative process has become dependent upon technology and technicity, it is extending beyond existing structures and social forces as a consequence. It is not destroying these structures and forces so much as subordinating them. It is modifying and displacing them in configurations whose main elements have been altered. Global society, classes, class relations, class conflicts, relations between peoples and nations—all are being subordinated to the process of accumulation. The great conflicts are not defunct. They have not been resolved or reduced, simply relegated to the background; and although this may be confusing, it in no way means that they no longer exist. Under capitalism (when wage rises meant that employers had to renew equipment before it was completely worn out, i.e. to invest, if they were to regain a competitive place in the market) class conflicts were an important stimulus and motivation; now their role is secondary.

From this perspective, the October Revolution looks like one episode in the process of accumulation. It may have been important in that it eliminated a bottleneck, but it was just one episode none the less. The other aspects of the Revolution are real to a certain extent, but in retrospect this is the aspect which dominates. The same is true for the Popular Front and fascism, and for colonialism and the breakdown of colonialism. Other questions relative to structures and regimes (superstructures) may arise, but since they are determined rather than determinants, they are of only secondary importance.
These propositions are consonant with the fundamental methodological and theoretical assertions of Marxism. Nevertheless, they introduce something different and unforeseen. Technology and technological knowledge were subordinate to historical and social conditions, and this was something which hindered the cumulative process; Marx wished to reverse this situation, and to give technology and technological knowledge complete control. His plan was not intended to hinder the process further, nor did it wish to give it free rein. Marx believed that the proletariat would achieve conscious control over the objective process, directing it in order to satisfy basic or more culturally sophisticated needs, but above all in order to transform everyday life completely. Envisaged as a social force and as 'subject' or consciousness, the proletariat would take charge of the objective process which Marx had conceptualized. The pace at which the working class would continue the process would be planned, controlled and moderated, and in the end an economy geared to heightened physical enjoyment would be created. As we have indicated, Marx proposed two models for the new life: one primarily ethical, the other more aesthetic. But this option was not of any real importance, since in practical terms it would not present a problem until a much later stage. So the working class in power could go on working towards the withering away of the state. Its political aim would be to do away with politics by the shortest route possible, thus ushering in the era of complete freedom.

Today the process of accumulation is running unchecked against a background of contradictions, the most important of which is the contradiction between socialism and capitalism. Surely nobody needs to be reminded that this process is extending beyond the confines of the planet, while the problems on earth – notably those caused by uneven development and demographic growth – remain unresolved. The investments required for the exploration and conquest of the cosmos appear enormous. They may end up limiting the production of consumer goods.

As a consequence, uneven development has taken on a new and dramatic significance. An 'elite' group of specialized technicians and managers could travel through space and organize interstellar tourism, while backward populations would be left on earth to vegetate in an everyday life which stayed virtually unchanged. Hence a new aspect of the aleatory. It is possible that 'we' (humanity taken in the totality of its contradictions, riven by them, driven forward by them) could have chosen to conquer space without having consciously made the choice, and before certain pressing problems had been resolved. Similar unconscious and irreversible options have been taken before.
(For example: the motorcar, which has been one of the most decisive elements in the industrial economy of the capitalist West, an indispensable possession and a determinant of urban life, etc. The socialist East has 'opted' differently, or so it would appear. Choice and destiny are one and the same thing.)

So, with its multiple aspects and changing relations, the process of accumulation can be seen as the backbone of human history (or rather, of that part of the 'prehistoric era' which has unfolded since the process began to take root: the sixteenth century in Europe and modernity in its various phases). It has proved to be as much determinate as determined, as much a productive process as a product. In particular it is constantly producing new situations, as much through internal modifications within its configurations as by its changing relations with the areas which remain external to it. These situations are not non-determined and meaningless. They are determined, partially predictable as possibilities, always analysable a posteriori; yet they are always new, unsettling, unforeseen. Essential determinations and processes produce relatively stable structures which last for a certain time. There is an element of chance in the situations themselves, that is, the dialectical relation between circumstances and structures (for example: the wide range of consequences the process of accumulation has had in Africa and Asia, with its implications and its constraints – the intensity of the problems of leadership and the state in those countries).

Certain elements are determined: industrialization on a world scale, which is already overflowing the confines of the 'world' and the idea of the world as something on a human scale. Certain elements are unforeseen: forms, imperatives. Options arise, since the choice between the different possibilities is determined, inevitable, frequently blind, and sometimes, when it is based on a strategy, conscious.

All this is helping us to reach a clearer understanding of what the aleatory and the determined problematic really are. And at last the full importance of the concept of uneven development is becoming apparent.

For the time being theoretical thought cannot supersede the double determination, the double reality, the double consciousness: possibilities–actualities, certainty–uncertainty, problematic–categoric. History has exposed the mistaken belief that totalization has been achieved. As a systematized philosophy this totalization has been superseded, and it is too early for it to begin taking a new form.

For the moment, one of the tasks confronting theoretical thought is to study the process of accumulation, to describe it, analyse it and
present it with all its implications: the dialectical relation between structures and circumstances, uneven developments, new situations. Another task for theoretical thought: to confront the cumulative with the non-cumulative which remains external to it, that is to say, cyclical or discontinuous processes, the natural or ‘private’ side of man, the everyday, art, symbols, emotions. Symbolisms, sex, life cycles, hunger, thirst, sleep – these do not constitute an integral or integrating part of accumulation, which is based on memory and moves forward by ‘snowballing’. But this does not mean that they do not interact – on the contrary. Malaises, desynchronizations and distortions are as much a part of modernity as the cumulative process. And the aleatory crops up here again in new guises.

11. Question marks proliferate, but not at random. What positions will the rising generations adopt – what positions are they already adopting – in relation to the problem of the technologization of men and the cybernation of society? It is such an enormous problem, and yet we are living with it without being able to see it in its entirety, as terrifying as a monster from a Lovecraft story, and maybe equally unreal. The aleatory content is such that we cannot even say if the problem is colossal or limited, on a world-historical scale or momentary. Will the men of the future accept technology along the lines of the audacious yet uncertain models presented by science fiction, with its extraordinary mishmash of outdated metaphysics? Will they go on to the bitter end, oblivious to the dangers of society becoming cybernetically overorganized, launching fearlessly into the cosmic adventure and its consequences, perhaps in the hope of leaving technicity behind, controlling it, escaping from it? Will they perhaps reject technology lock, stock and barrel – technicity, technocracy, technolatry, technophrenitis – in order to outflank the monster and forge ahead towards freedom along different paths? But then, what will that freedom be, what supersession lies ahead? Will they accept one thing and not another, and dismantle the obstacle? What does the future hold for alienation, disalienation, new alienations, dialectic, authentic creativity? Are we moving towards a world state, or the withering away of national states, or a combination of the two? Are we moving towards a worldwide or supramondial industrial society, or towards a proliferation of technological and industrial societies, differentiated by their history, their past, their inequalities, their cultures and their futures?

We must not limit these questions to technicity and the state. What will be the behaviour of future generations in relation to the imaginary, to fiction, to utopianism? In relation to labour, to reason, to analytic intelligence, to discourse? In relation to irony, to play, to the
serious and the frivolous? What would be the attitude of future generations were they rid of the personality cult of the hero or the genius, of the combined fetishes of sex, death, the banal, the trivial, the past, night, archaism, the here-and-now, the divine, the satanic, guilt, innocence — in a word, rid of all that old baggage which went to make up romanticism, and is still with us; the ragged, hand-me-down garb of people who still imagine themselves to be in the vanguard of things?

If we moderns are not caught in an endlessly descending and bottomless spiral, if our refusal to offer a single answer (socialism, progress, fatherland, nation, optimism) does not mean that we are destined for nihilism, what will become of the meanings we attach to these commonplace terms: classicism, neoclassicism, romanticism, revolutionary romanticism? Will it become necessary to invent new terms to indicate that known attitudes — classicism and romanticism, for example — have been superseded?

And another question, neither the most important nor the least: what is to be done with philosophy? Will it seem like a corpse, killed off by the victory of a system (Holbach’s, Hegel’s, Lenin’s, Wittgenstein’s?) or by the bankruptcy of speculative thought? Are there people hanging fire until the moment comes when they can reduce it to science, to technicity, or to a specific technique — logic and applied logic, for example, or a universal, computerized semantics? Or will someone in the near or distant future draw up a picture of the universe, using new elements? Will efforts be made to supersede philosophy, either by making physical enjoyment of the world supersede speculative thought about it, or by exploring the cosmos using new means or, if necessary, the leftovers of previous systems? Or finally, will philosophy be thought of (along with art, possibly, and non-technological culture) as a harmless pastime, a hobby for a group of eccentric and socially redundant people?

More question marks, a swarm of them. What will become of humanism? Is it only the old humanism which is breaking down, the humanism which conceived of a humanized world on the scale of the small community, the family, the city? Will it live on, perpetuated by nostalgia? Will it be overtaken by a superhumanism, a humanism of disproportion? Does any of this still make sense, or is the human adventure going even further, somewhere else, somewhere other, beyond the boundaries of man himself?

12. The very important phenomenon of accelerated moral wear and tear in no way vitiates the notion of the cumulative process. Investments and equipment become obsolete even before they have been paid for, making way for even more extensive equipment and
investment. New technologies replace old ones, which they use as a base and scientific launching pad.

Accelerated moral wear and tear also affects products, men and ideas, although in an extremely uneven way. Both an effect and a cause, it contributes to the acceleration of this process, and reveals the qualitative change taking place within it: the predominance of technicity.

The area between the moment a given technology becomes operational and the moment it becomes worn out by use is easily determinable, although its constant changes are difficult to chart. It is an area where the impression of modernity reigns, triumphalist yet tentative in the face of its own destiny.

13. Technicity is being introduced into everyday life, and yet it is neglecting it. Technical inventions are modifying private life, towns, landscapes, but in a brutal and discontinuous way, without links. They are fragmenting everyday life, and are failing to integrate it into a wider system. What comparison can there be between the telephone, or the radio, or household appliances, and the incredible machines which explore the depths of matter, of time and of space?

As a result, the rifts are deeper than ever. As yet the technical object does not constitute a human ‘milieu’, and cannot mediate between man and the world. Perhaps it never will. High technicity and the highly technical object are based upon fragmented activities which they control so effectively that they seem to transcend them. Life outside of high technicity becomes tinged with an impotent pride, the vain reflection of technicity and the powerlessness of fragmented labour faced with the objects it has produced. Life outside technology does not participate. It contemplates, it admires, it gets bored.

The result is that ‘creation’ becomes fetishized and degraded first to a cult of making things and having the know-how to make them, and then to a reverence for ‘contraptions’ and ‘gadgets’. There is a trivial ideology surrounding the making of things, and an equally trivial attitude of reverential contemplation of them once they have been made. Both are nourished by the relation which individual consciousnesses maintain with a palpable reality which has been saturated with technological abstractions.

Needless to say, the ideology of making things and of reverential contemplation of them is kept busy by an aestheticism which is on a par with vulgarized scientism.

From now on, the idea of ‘creativity’ becomes a fetish. It is no longer a vague idea which somehow corresponds to real creativity. Creation and manufacture have become synonymous. Art does not
imitate nature. Nature does not imitate art. Technology unconsciously reproduces the unconscious creative gestures of nature, itself reduced to a clear-cut, finite process of ‘making things’.

But one of the characteristics of the much-admired and sought-after cult of making things and having the know-how to make them is precisely that it differentiates itself from fragmented labour – in other words, from what everyone does in real terms in a praxis dominated by technicity. By practising do-it-yourself or para-aesthetic activities people develop a certain expertise, a technology-in-miniature which apes large-scale technology. This makes them feel modern.

The objectivity of the technological process is paralleled and opposed by an unleashing of subjectivity. One might expect that technicity would impose higher norms upon this subjectivity. In fact, what it imposes are its own standards and regulations concerning ways of behaviour, knowledge, communication and effectiveness. Outside of these norms for technological knowledge, everyone tries to get round the rules, or escape from them. It is an area where subjectivity is rife. It feels rejected but liberated on its own specific terrain: private life, aestheticism, moralism. Untrammelled by facts and figures, it proclaims itself to be an infinite value.

The ‘technicity–subjectivity’ antithesis goes much farther than comparable antitheses from the previous period, the antithesis between the ‘quantitative’ and the ‘qualitative’, for example (in which the one makes a fetish of the other). Subjectivity becomes aware that the reason for its own absence is the prevailing hegemony of abstraction and duality; this gives it the pretext to free itself unconditionally, and also the material it needs to make its presence felt at the heart of its absence. Where abstraction, technology, the defined and the finite reign, subjectivity cannot be. Thus subjectivity is boundless, infinite. It is not, and it is.

This subjectivity uses abstract objects and signs – systems of language and images – in a naive or crude rhetoric which allows it to compensate and sublimate. It becomes exaggerated and self-dramatizing. It strives for ‘being’ because what ‘is’ is increasingly out of reach. It wants to have its own revolution, on its own terms. Unable to change the world, it makes a world of itself, an infinite world: an illusory microcosm.

14. Marx’s thought terminated at a crossroads, two highways, two dead ends: an ethical vision and an aesthetic one, thus posing the problem of the supersession of morality and art in and by a total praxis.

But – remarkably – both moralism and aestheticism are used by
modernity as modern alibis for avoiding these problems. These alibis are as useful under capitalism as they are under socialism, and they are used by the bourgeoisie and the leaders of the Eastern bloc alike. Either attitude makes it possible to avoid the question of the conscious transformation of everyday life. So as not to think about it, the banner of art, or of morality, or of both, is unfurled. Yet the problem remains, unresolved, agonizing, a constant reminder that something new must be found to replace the old, albeit only imperfectly. Life is changing, for better or for worse, and maybe both at the same time, but not in the way it could. And anyway, it might well be that history has ironically taken a path other than that of the revolutionary transformation of everyday life.

At this point we will list some of subjectivity's strategic devices, all useful as alibis and illusions. These alibis of modern consciousness are a part of modernity. Not one of them is new. Today they are being produced stripped down to essentials, autonomous, like all forms of fragmented activity which want to be total but can attain only an illusory totality.

(a) Aestheticism – We are experiencing a frenzied proliferation of art via a double medium: a market, and technicity. There is a ‘modernist’ group within the bourgeoisie which speculates in the purchase of works of art, paintings mostly. It is like a stock exchange with its quotations, prices and crashes, and these ‘modernists’ play it. Now and again innovations come along to ‘revolutionize’ the monotony of established aesthetic techniques; but what is happening above all is that for an increasingly large public, technicity and technical know-how are gaining cult status. A technical understanding of works of art is no longer the preserve of a cultivated few, of artists and their friends. There is a widespread understanding of how things are made, and of ‘creativity’.21

The first trait of this aestheticism (to be seen in the press, above all in the weeklies): a shortening of topicality, that is, the period during which a work undergoes moral wear and tear, which ends when that work becomes either forgotten or integrated within established culture and history as a ‘classic’.

The second (and correlative) trait: aesthetic (plastic) experimentation is accelerating. The public rushes headlong in search of new and clever techniques, with ‘the critics’ as go-between. In effect, topicality has two sides: production and ‘criticism’. The so-called ‘critics’ have a complex function. They inform. They circulate representations, and notably they let it be understood that many exciting new things are happening. The critics are selective. They proclaim what is
modern, point it out and transmit it pre-digested to their readers and listeners. They provide the public with an easily digestible product. They peddle a technical jargon specific to each of the arts, and for the public this becomes part of the 'language' or 'writing' of art. Their work is a magma made up indiscriminately of 'creation', 'making', 'know-how', technicity and innovation. We all know that if it is to be genuinely clairvoyant and honestly perceptive (as it may sometimes be), the profession of critic is not an easy one. But is not one of his tasks to extend the market and to ease the way for speculative operations within it? And as for his ideological functions.

Consumption on a colossal scale, acre upon acre of technical waffle, the apparent vitality of art - such are the prime characteristics of aestheticism. Aestheticism treats art as though it were a process of accumulation, and pitches camp within it. It is certainly true that knowledge about art accumulates, as does the number of known works of art from the prehistoric era to the present day. But guided by fashion, topicality, modernism and snobbery, our contemporary aestheticism confuses knowledge of art with the destiny of art, just as it confuses the techniques of art with artistic creativity.

The important thing is to work quickly and turn out something new, something original, and therefore something subjective. The connection between technicity and subjectivity in their reciprocal antithesis now appears in a new light. In vulgarized aestheticism, for the people who produce and above all for the people who do not produce, subjectivity has free rein, unhindered, unconstrained, just like in the good old days of the romantic belle âme. Aestheticism makes people believe that they can use discourse to participate in creation (genuine creation or an ersatz). There is no risk of being compromised by the birthpangs of true creativity. And anyway, we are all potential creators (who does not want to write their novel, to spend their Sundays sketching or painting?...)

But these traits are not sufficient in themselves to define modern aestheticism. In our view it is based more on an error about art in general than on trumped-up enthusiasms for such-and-such an art form or work of art. Aestheticism accepts the premiss that there can be such a thing as an art which can produce constructs and exceptional moments while remaining in essence external to everyday life. It accepts the premiss that this art can penetrate everyday life from outside. Thus, by containing an accumulation of paintings, reproductions, curios and knick-knacks, a bourgeois house would make its inhabitants non-bourgeois.

It is not just that aestheticism disregards certain burning questions about the future of art. Unwittingly, it is actually working towards the
withering away of art. Above all it turns a blind eye to the question of style in everyday life, and of how the rift between art and the everyday, and thus between man and his own self, is to be superseded. Aestheticism is an alibi. It pretends to fill in the chasm between unsatisfied subjectivities and increasingly unattainable accumulation.

In order to clarify this idea – namely, the externality of art in relation to everyday life, and the illusory transmutation of the everyday into aestheticism – we now need to develop several partial ideas. An extended critique of aestheticism would entail a critique of pseudo-worlds: the ‘world’ of painting, the ‘world’ of poetry, the ‘world’ of music – the ‘world’ of Joyce, of Proust, of Faulkner, etc. – the ‘world’ of images, of discourse, and so on. Radical critique would expose the exaggerations and dramatizing of pseudo-worlds and quasi-worlds, each with its own language and writing. Obviously it would not overlook the self-styled ‘world of the imagination’ or the ‘world of magic’. It would cast a pitiless light on the associated themes of abjectness and purity (‘pure’ lucidity, ‘pure’ cruelty, ‘pure’ vision; that is, purity as a world, with its complement, sin and abjectness). It would unmask the alienation of ‘worlds which save’ (salvation through children, or love, or women, or self-sacrifice, or fatherhood or motherhood, or expiation, or faith, or nature . . . ).

Aestheticism has its pretensions to totality, to unity, to coherence, to the ‘total’ world, to the conception and creation of the world. But it accepts fragmentation and division; it increases them, splitting the chaos of the palpable world from the aesthetic concepts and values which organize it. It sees fragmentation as the means by which disquiet, anguish and pure subjectivity can be brought to the transcendent world . . .

Be they microcosms, subworlds or superworlds, these ‘worlds’ represent the postulates and justifications of aestheticism as if they were something newly discovered. They intercept the efforts of radical critique to attain genuine presence and knowledge through the negation and self-destruction that art and aestheticism, and more generally the culture of the bourgeois era (and even its analytic and discursive ‘logos’), are inflicting upon themselves.

(b) Ontologism – Let us clear up a misunderstanding. This term in no way implies that we would like to forbid research into ‘being’, or investigations into the cosmos. The birth or the successive births of man and consciousness into nature deserve an explanation. Nothing can forbid thought and memory from attempting to make the journey from the riddle of our beginnings to our present selves – from childhood, nature and the cosmos to the here-and-now – in reverse. If man
'is' becoming and historicity, there is an as-yet-unexplained relation between the being of becoming and the becoming of being, and contemporary thought is unable to say with any confidence whether they coincide or whether they diverge. Here the reader will recognize the principle of double determination. Our immense, endless journey is always two-sided: knowledge and imagination, science and memory. If for the time being unity and totality are out of reach, if all the philosophical systems have failed, then the problem is still meaningful.

And it is precisely philosophy which has made us aware that the being of our consciousness and our consciousness of being can diverge, and that the gap between them can be boundless; this amorphous no-man's-land is the spawning ground of representations. Hence the necessity for a radical critique of representations: they seem to give 'being' the illusion of presence, when in fact they are reiterating its absence.

In modernity, the ontological illusion confuses 'being' and 'representation'; it snatches at representations in an effort to embody itself as represented being, thereby satisfying the demands of unbridled subjectivity.

I declare that I possess being. The discourse I use to make this declaration is as coherent as possible, but it is always founded on rhetorical devices (metaphor, metonymy, ellipsis, etc.). I have my own representation of being. Having discovered it, I hold on to it and protect it from non-being. I own it. It is my property. The ontological illusion is a particularity of ideological illusion. Discourse — or rather, subdiscourse (philosophical discourse) — becomes magical, or recovers the magical powers it has lost. This illusion explains why there has been such a great vogue for philosophy in modern times, just when it has begun to wither away. It is a riddle fragmented research has yet to solve. Philosophy is everywhere. Therefore it is nowhere. Philosophy per se, as a representation, is fading away. As an institution it is thriving, especially where it has forged links with the state.

To try to satisfy being — represented being, that fictitious or idealized possession — by classifying it as private property: such is the temptation of ontology, the ontological illusion. The apparent solidity of such representations (a solidity which evaporates at the slightest challenge, the most benign of criticisms, the first hint of irony, hence the extreme susceptibility of the owners of this kind of property) leads to several dogmatisms; for example Thomism, or 'Marxist' materialism. In particular, as soon as materialism turns dogmatic it provides a host of extraordinary intellectual distractions; all sorts of problems can be sidetracked, including the problems of Marxism as revolutionary theory and practice.
Once subjectivity is unleashed and allowed to run unchecked, its vacuity becomes apparent. It aspires to the status of being, and its representations act as a counterbalance to the growing weight of technicity as it vanishes into the stratosphere. Once it is made a representation, being seems earthly and palpable, and ontology becomes so voracious that it will make indiscriminate use of anything or anyone to satisfy its hunger. Anything will do: magic, occultism, or a scientism which extrapolates the results of the sciences. Always open to revision, always more dialectical, more extensive, the concepts of each particular science can be applied in a way which gives them the magical power to draw up a general picture of ‘being’. We have already made our opinion clear as to what should be thought of such a picture: it comes either too late or too soon. If philosophy is about to be summoned out of retirement, it will no longer be as a so-called cosmological or philosophical system. The abusive use of dogmatism has thrown such attempts at synthesis and totalization into disrepute. In its own way ontologism may be fighting against technological alienation, but in doing so it is reviving philosophical (speculative) alienation, and in a more acute form than before.

(c) Moralism, conformity, moral order – If it has been unable to find a representation to hang on to, pure or purified subjectivity is free (too free: separated) to cling to values. Indeed, in this modern world it is extremely tempting to see values (any values: feelings, intuition, dreams, emotions, coherence, logic, reason) and the chaos of reality as dichotomous; in this way values are seen as absolutes in relation to the relative and the contingent. The temptation to normalize is not the same as the search for an ethic, just as the temptation to ontologize is not the same as the attempt to investigate ‘being’. The latter is defined by the proclamation of a representation as a presence, and the former by the proclamation of a value as an absolute.

It is impossible to generalize values. They all bear the mark of historical and sociological relativity. Now it is the rule of conduct of all values that they should aspire to universality, and this reveals one of the illusions inherent in them. This is a vital illusion, but one which leads to an error. Once a value wants or pretends to be tolerant, it begins to undermine its own affirmativeness; timid, sceptical, it begins to decline. Since values belong to groups, or to mutually dependent individuals and groups, they become acts and decisions, elements in a strategy. There are words for the way they are inevitably projected beyond the individual and the group: circulation, advertising, propaganda, intimidation, terrorism. It is in and by such values that the social group makes itself active; it is combative; it proposes its aims
before imposing them; it dons a mask for itself and for other groups. Behind the apparent positivity of values lie negativity, defiance and confrontation. To recognize or acknowledge that they are relative will compromise them, and in the eye of the user group, that would be an evil (if we may be permitted to combine the words ‘evil’ and ‘eye’ in this context). The greatest enemy is never the enemy, it is the critic of values, the man who knows them best, their sceptical and tolerant friend.

On the other hand, moralism involves a series of determined operations: first, a blind eye is turned to the context, there is no question of countenancing anything which might show the chosen value in a relative light; secondly, everything is systematized, and the real historical context and an analysis of the social group which holds the value are replaced by an ideological context, absolutely coherent, absolutely justifiable; thirdly, everything is dogmatized, and the need to opt is countered by a sort of option prefabricated in eternity: the chosen value is an absolute, and confers absolution from the need to opt. Henceforth values are decreed by moralism, and something is founded: a moral order.

Meanwhile, the ‘world’ goes on turning. Moralism offers a cure for aestheticism (or vice versa). It is a court of appeal in which a disappointed ontology can air its grievances. Our three attempts or temptations are active in real terms, and the interpersonal relations they establish are alienating and alienated. What does it matter? They are relations, even ideologically expressed relations, signifiable and ‘institutionalizable’. Thus the three illusions come together in a compensatory system and an apparently unitary vision of a fragmented ‘world’, a quasi-system composed of bits and pieces, where the buck is constantly passed from one department to another, without ever stopping anywhere.

For each distraught subjectivity, values – the absolute ideology or the absolute beyond ideology – are a possible means of denying other subjectivities, or being accepted by them. But they are also a means of accepting them by implication, since once the values are recognized they become joint property. Multifarious illusion. In its triumphalism, subjectivity comes face to face with other subjectivities; it throws down the gauntlet. If all goes well, with luck on its side, the other subjectivities will be vincible-ergo-convincible, and it will be able to dominate them. No further need to acknowledge them, no further need to be acknowledged. The temptation of moralism reveals infinite subjectivity to be a void. It is the alibi for modern subjectivity, and its lack of content.
(d) **Scientism and cybernetics** – With its commanding range of theories and techniques, cybernetics seems to be the most modern form of scientism. It is linked to a curious utopianism. We have already pointed out the importance of the aleatory in modernity, and how information theory rationalizes the unpredictability of becoming. Would it be possible to organize social praxis as though it were a gigantic, perfectly programmed machine which would inject rationalized and processed information into praxis, thus making it completely rational? This utopian synthesis of science fiction, scientism and technocracy is based upon the role of signals in modern life. They are regulators. Forbidding this, stipulating that, they organize in a logical manner. Each signalling system (e.g. traffic lights) determines a dispatching mechanism. Only the command permits movement. It is nothing more than the self-regulation of movement, which brings us back to the well-known concepts of feedback, scanning and homeostasis – that is to say, systems of internal checks and balances open to information and to be found also in physics, biology and physiology. Conditioned by signalling systems (including language), and regulated in an extraordinarily complex way, social life could gradually become comparable to a highly advanced machine, able to adapt its programme according to the information received (i.e. the aleatory *per se*) in order to absorb it. In the end, spontaneity would be indistinguishable from calculation, and humanism from technicity. In this age of cybernetics there would be a new technological milieu in which man would be reconciled with material nature. The ills of the aleatory would be eradicated, since the aleatory *per se* would be predicted and prognosticated, just one computation among many – demographic, economic, urban. . . . History has already known such self-regulating systems of checks and balances (all with their flaws, crises, wars and violent disturbances), but this one would be more flexible, more balanced, more perfected. Why not call it democracy realized, socialism, Communism?

Incontestably, modern theories modify the old concept of statistics, which worked upon the past, preferably static and stabilized, in order to extrapolate the future. Information theory is more deeply concerned with possibilities.

However, it will admit to the unforeseen only if it can locate it in the information zone between repetitiveness (redundancy) and whatever the permitted code or repertoire finds unacceptable, unassimilable or irreducible. For the cybernetic society, creativity, authentic spontaneity and full freedom would fall into the latter category, as something unacceptable. If repertoires – permitted signs and languages, for example – are fetishized, then whatever cannot be
expressed in those signs and languages becomes as meaningless as a silent scream, to use an appropriate metaphor. Are we not already on the brink of this abyss? Cybernation is admissible in terms of the average zones of man, or of the average man taken en masse. Only within this average zone will it admit to spontaneity and freedom. And if it is true to say that it no longer makes a fetish of machines, or of pure and simple repetitiveness, this is in order to label all exceptions more effectively as preposterous, superfluous, aberrant and ‘deviant’, if not downright pathological. As a consequence, the role of signals is exaggerated and the role of symbols is devalued. Symbols, those nuclei of sensibility and emotivity, are slaughtered. They are not replaced.

Organized along the lines of a railway network or a system of traffic lights, would not the cybernetic society be a society which raised boredom to the level of a dangerously invisible yet omnipresent institution? No moral order is worse than a moral order which is democratically accepted (by the masses) and imposed for technological rather than moral reasons. Nature is below moral order, creativity is above it – how can they be brought together? Their juncture in social homeostasis would be a parody of total and totally human praxis. Overorganized, society would no longer have symbols, contours, structures. You can mould sand into the shape of a brick and leave it to harden, but it will still be sand!

The cybernetic temptation brings several fetishisms in its wake. First, the fetishism of signification and the sign. When no clear distinction is made between symbols, signs and signals, signs tend to take on a disproportionate importance, and are seen as synonymous with signals. The result of this fetishism is a curious one: on the one hand, there is a precise theory – information theory – a science, and machines; on the other, human and social reality is reduced to a system of signs and significations: it loses all its solidity, its substantiality and its frames of reference; it begins to crumble – or rather, to evaporate.

At the same time communication is fetishized as a form or a system of forms, and the question of whether or not there still is anything to transmit or communicate is never asked. The content within the form becomes blurred and forgotten, and this helps to dismantle it and the symbols it contains, until language is reduced to a mere system of signals and signalling; practical discourse is subsumed by the audiovisual, which makes no clear distinction between the prelinguistic and supralinguistic levels of communication via emotions and symbols.

In our opinion, the cybernetic society is not a fiction or an imaginary danger. It is already upon us. And so cybernetic theory would be a ‘reflection’ of cybernetic practice, an ideological superstructure.
Self-regulation is already functioning, and all exceptions are rejected as deviant and pathological.

And yet, can it be fully realized? It has produced a variety of reactions. Some are adverse: purely spontaneous protest, weak at first but gaining strength; protests by the social forces, and even the political forces (mainly on the socialist side) against technocracy and the dangers of technocratic ideology, dangers which are linked to the attempts to solve human and social problems by technological means. Nevertheless, the questions remain. Will industrial society become cybernated? Will that be how it will find unity and equilibrium? Is it going towards self-regulation in the way we have described, driven by an inner necessity stronger than the protests of a freedom which is being emptied of all meaning and reduced to mere anarchism? What is 'socialism' in relation to such a 'state'? And so on and so forth.

(e) Nihilism – God is dead, and with him, beauty. Everything is permissible. Nothing can stop the unleashing of violence. Morality is helpless. Art is not a substitute for life, real life, absent life. Like speculation, like the state, art alienates. It is withering away. It will die, leaving us to our nakedness. Nihilism is not decline. It is an ordeal we must endure.

If Nietzsche's theories are to be taken seriously, we are already in the midst of nihilism, and already we can see the way out, the opening, the rebirth beyond. We will leave nihilism behind the moment the philosophers, moralists and aestheticians begin deploring our entry into it. Nihilism is both disguised and revealed by the barriers we build against it. Intolerable for full consciousness, nihilism is a purifying force. It is the radical test, the catharsis of tragedy born into language, historical consciousness and praxis. It is the harbinger of another future.

Revolution was supposed to compensate for the deficiencies of Providence and of the Absolute of God. It has failed to establish the new life. The state was supposed to wither away, alienation was supposed to fade away. Not so. The history of industrialized society is leading us towards the ultimate pleonasm: obsessive repetition in the flimsy, artificially sustained and illusory guise of permanent renewal, stagnation beneath the mask of frenetic agitation, news without newness and without a new life. The 'worldwide', the 'planetary' are already synonyms for the world of boredom, where the maelstrom of technicity leaves human relations and everyday life in its wake like so much stagnant jetsam. Above this planet, full as an egg with technological and human machines, emptied of authentic life, the danger of atomic death is hovering. Above this planet, the doors are opening on to the cosmic adventure. We are surrounded by nihilism. We will pass
beyond it, but only if we act and live in small groups, revolutionary microsocieties.

What is the answer? There is no doubt that nihilism is deeply inherent in modernity. No doubt one day it will be proved that modernity was the period of nihilism, and that 'something' emerged from it which nobody could predict. This new birth, this possibility of possibilities, this horizon of horizons is exactly what we are unable to include in our conception of what is possible, because it can be determined only by negating the categories of thought and life. Is that a reason for rejecting it? Our understanding of modernity relies on extreme hypotheses: atomic warfare, the destruction of the planet, a return to the level of primitive man for those lucky enough to survive, the cosmic adventure which abandons the planet, leaving it in deplorable poverty with uneven development intact. Nihilism is part of these extreme hypotheses. It is the background to the picture, if not the picture itself. To point out the danger, and unfurl the banner of nihilism so as to force those who can and will to overcome it – such is the task ahead. It is a dangerous one, but it must be attempted. We could call it: the great challenge. The sky of modernity has seen several stars in the ascendant: the sable sun of melancholy and ennui, disaster's pale moon, the red sun of joy. We are faced with an unforeseen astrological conjuncture, from which we are unable to calculate a horoscope.

15. This picture of modernity would be incomplete if we failed to sketch the relations of the modern with the past, and with history. We will now try to grasp one of today's most profound contradictions. This period which sees and calls itself entirely new is overcome by an obsession with the past: memory, history. History begins hic et nunc, with the here-and-now, with each passing minute. Historical becoming is immediately upon us, and immediately it becomes history, known and recognized historicity, historical consciousness, chained to a vaguely distant past according to which the present vainly attempts to situate itself.

Along with God and the devil, along with nihilism, it is the grand obsession, the symptom of a profoundly guilty conscience. No challenge can reassure modernity about itself.

Our knowledge of the socialist countries is too limited for us really to understand how they treat history (although it would seem that they constantly proclaim the objectivity of history and of its laws in order to manipulate the past in the light of the present and the future, and sometimes according to the present-day political imperatives of propaganda), so we will limit ourselves to the bourgeois side.
Throughout the course of a dramatic history in which the bourgeoisie acted in a revolutionary way and proclaimed itself a class (the 'third estate') opposed to the feudal class, bourgeois culture has been underpinned by a historical consciousness founded on knowledge and practice. It was the bourgeois era which shed light on human historicity. It discovered history and proclaimed it as the fundamental science of man, perhaps his only science. So the class situation of the bourgeoisie was genuinely defined by the consciousness and the science of history.

Little by little, that culture deteriorated. Instead of the past being clarified in the light of the present, and vice versa, it becomes a glass in which the present seeks its own image. Knowledge of becoming is not used as a basis for present action; instead, the past is used to justify the present. The elaboration of increasingly rigorous scientific methods for studying the past cannot compensate for the alienated relation of this society and its culture to the past. There are some remarkable historical works which serve to reveal this worrying relation, but do little to overcome it.

The result is contradictory: at one and the same time an ignorance about becoming and about the lessons of this historical past, and an extraordinary overloading of culture and consciousness. Like other knowledge and techniques, knowledge about the past accumulates. Nostalgic memories are evoked to compensate for anxieties about what is possible, but they provide no clear-cut answers. We are overloaded with fragmented pieces of unarticulated information, the debris of the past, knowledge as a scrapyard. Nevertheless, the objectivity of history as an object of methodical knowledge and highly precise techniques is constantly being questioned. Now it appears as a limit, now as a lure, and now as a pretext for mystifications.

This is not simply a question of attitude on the part of professional historians. It is a social and cultural phenomenon. Knowledge of history and the consciousness which comes with it take on the appearance of a ritual invocation, a grand magical ceremony during which modernity hopes to see the conjuring forth of a style, a thought, a status, an authenticity, a presence all its own. Sometimes this strange ceremony is like a ritual of atonement or purification.

But to no avail. Nothing can free modernity from its guilty conscience and its absence. History cannot exorcize revolution.

But magic, exorcism and ceremonies do not suffice to explain the obsession with the past in bourgeois culture (i.e. the way 'modern' ideology interprets history). The evocations are not simply aimed at the long cortège of departed souls. The historian and the historical consciousness of the twentieth century may remind us of Ulysses'
descent into the underworld, but there is more to it than that. A region of the past comes into focus, a brightly projected image comes to life before our eyes, acting out its tragedy on a vast, imaginary screen. It is the centuries-long dialogue with Ancient Greece.

We ask questions of Greece, our questions, in the hope that it will answer. Our dialogue with other eras, with India or the Orient, is marginal. Greece alone concerns us. Greece alone caught a glimpse of the total man, vitality, reason, harmony — and let them slip away. It was Greece which created historical thought and political thought. Reflecting on technique and art as productive and creative acts, the Greek philosophers discovered active reason, based on social praxis. They gave language a form; they elaborated its theoretical and practical categories. By meditating on its social and political effectiveness, they brought the essentials of social and political praxis to the logos; they produced theories of grammar, logic, rhetoric and sophistry; they pursued the movement from social practice to words and discourse, from opinion to highly coherent discourse — philosophical discourse — and then turned back from discourse to praxis again in an attempt to render it coherent. They also sensed the limits of the logos. They posed all the problems. They tried all the directions: system, being, nothingness, wisdom, dialectic, atomism, Stoicism and Epicureanism.

We ask questions of Greece. Some are addressed to the pre-Socratics, others to Plato or Aristotle. Some are addressed to one or other of the geniuses who keep vigil before the ruined temple of Greek reason: Heraclitus, Parmenides, Aeschylus, Herodotus. Others even attempt to distil a renewed wisdom and science from the words Greece has left us. In this great, lengthy dialogue, partial dialogues take place.

Why was the total man a failure? Why were the philosophers unable to save Greece from disaster? What are the relations between philosophy and politics? Why did tragedy follow so swiftly after the miraculous birth? And what does the enigma of Socrates mean — dialogue, maieutic, irony, challenge, provocation, condemnation, iniquitous judgement and just sentence of the political city, insecure and under threat?

Greece, the original source, offers the only ideal and the only idea of man’s possibilities. If we dream of a France safe from disaster and promoted to a socialism worthy of the name, we are thinking of a new Greece. When we question Greece, we are questioning a historically tested utopianism. In Greece we recognize our own problems; or we want to know how our problems differ from hers. Greece is the yardstick against which we measure our own self-knowledge.

And what is most strange is that with all these questions about reason and discourse, their significance and their limits, we have been
invaded by the myths of Greece. With them come all the bad dreams, the nightmares, the forebodings about imminent catastrophe, the vain attempts at catharsis through tragedy and philosophy: Oedipus and the Sphinx, the Atreids, the Trojan Horse.

Nietzsche began this dialogue with Greece, and he never forgot its meaning: its astonishing destiny, its 'worldwide' status, from Rome to the Indies, but only after the catastrophe of its decline. Nietzsche used this destiny to construct an important argument in favour of nihilism. Only when its most subtle essence has perished can civilization thrive.

This riddle of decline has never been solved. It was the Sphinx's eternal question; neither Oedipus, as a Greek, nor Socrates, as a man in general, could answer it. Could man be defined as a being to whom and through whom something new, something unforeseen is always happening, and who finds means of confronting the unforeseen which themselves give birth to more which is unforeseen, and so on ad infinitum?

Greece goes into decline – tragedy, catastrophe, momentary stasis before renaissances to come. Were the causes technical, did its technical and scientific inventiveness grind to a halt? But its inventive genius began to run dry only with the ascendancy of Rome, and in any case it was more a question of a shortage of applied techniques than one of theoretical discoveries. Were the causes social, and was slavery the main one? But if slavery was so instrumental in its decline, then what can explain the logos and reason, the glorious flowering of Greece, the search for the universal and the human, and the achievement of Athens as a limited but genuine democracy? Were the causes economic, with exchanges and commerce brought to a halt because they were an organic part of an archaic society? But then how can we explain the prosperity, the glory, the victories of Athens, the great hope it inspires? Were they historical and political, with civil wars, and pressure from archaic empires? Then why victory over the Persians and defeat at the hands of the Macedonians and the Romans? Is there a totality of reasons, causes, motives? Easily said. We should be wary of using the term 'totality' as a mask for our ignorance or our inability to think clearly when we are faced with enigmatic causes and sets of circumstances.

It is true that the idea of the human remained limited. It was never completely formulated and proclaimed. It was always being questioned, but within the limitations of its context it offered a happy balance. It is probable that the Greek individual never felt logically able to harmonize with the particular and the universal as an indivisible whole; he would always lapse into an awareness of his own
powerlessness and unhappiness – first into scepticism and sophistry, then into Epicureanism and Stoicism. Progress, unhappy consciousness, dialectical advance via contradictory figures? Perhaps, but regression too. Confidence in the universal logos and in the power of rational, philosophical and political discourse, at the heart of the city, did not last long. The desynchronization between the singular (the individual), the particular (the city) and the universal (rationality) was never brought into line. The gap between praxis and discourse at its most coherent – philosophy – remained unbridgeable. Socrates stepped back from this chasm; Plato and Aristotle only appeared to bridge it by fetishizing the logos as an idea or essence. . . .

And as we spiral back towards our starting point, let us pose the problem of the aleatory again, this time from a different perspective: 'Was the failure of Pericles, which was also the failure of Greece and of philosophy, necessary, inevitable, fated? If not, what caused it? If Pericles had succeeded, how would history have developed? What does the fact that he failed mean? When does the aleatory date from, and whence does it come?' These questions relate specifically to the general – too general – problem of meaning. The meaning of history, man's history, must be understood and vanquished; it is not written in advance by a destiny or a determinism; meanwhile, the possible and the impossible come face to face; the possible may fail, but it was possible; the irony of history is unfathomable, yet the gap between what was intended and what is achieved can be reduced, otherwise revolution would always be meaningless. Irony is not meaningless. Our dialogue with Greece can be concentrated around these two figures: Socrates and Pericles. . . .

Some Arguments about Modernity

(a) We are beginning to distinguish the forms and the concept of our modernity. It was born in the twentieth century with the considerable transformations which occurred within social praxis, with imperialism, the World Wars, the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and the preponderant role of technicity in the process of accumulation.

First, compared with previous periods, modernity brings a monumental disillusionment, and also a fearful sobering up after the spontaneous or force-fed ideological intoxications of the past (progress, freedom, democracy, etc.). These disappear, leaving a vacuum which dogmatisms, acts of faith and institutionalized, authoritarian ideologies in the final paroxysm of their own demise are unable to fill. Hence there is a general tendency towards cruel
lucidity and cynicism, neither of which is incompatible with the inability to see.

(b) Man's relations with himself have not been essentially transformed. These relations have changed much less than man's relation with the external world, which has fallen increasingly under the control of an ever more powerful technicity. Man's appropriation of his own nature (desire and sensual satisfactions) and the radical transformation of everyday life (prefigured by morality or art) were part of the initial Marxist programme for a total praxis, but they have not been achieved. The relations denoted by the terms 'hierarchy', 'power' and 'alienation' have not disappeared, although the possibility of their disappearance has been glimpsed.

Therefore, transformative action and radical critique have lagged behind the productive forces and the possibilities for transformation they harbour, and they are deflected from that goal. There is an increasingly intense feeling that the total revolutionary praxis which Marx thought would abolish all alienation has not been achieved. The total revolutionary act which, as a possibility, underpinned the Marxist conception of an experimental utopianism has not taken place. There is within modernity the confused and painful consciousness of a series of relative failures. The world has changed considerably, and is changing more and more, particularly on the socialist side, as is self-evident; but it has not changed exactly in the way that was hoped. Are all the grand hopes still viable, or have they been dashed for ever? Modernity is unable to answer. Becoming no longer has an 'end', an evident and perceptible finality, direction or meaning. Freedom remains a shattered ideal, confused, abstract but as powerful as ever, despite the threatening shadow cast by the knowledge that the simultaneous eradication of all alienations is probably a utopian dream. Hence the resurgence of worn-out ideologies and attitudes which nobody really believes in. This is what gives modernity its variety and its disorder. The more it craves coherence, the more confused it gets (and vice versa).

(c) Contradictions accumulate, but in a disorganized manner. The contradictions of our modernity exacerbate the contradictions of pre-modernity (the nineteenth century) without shedding any light on them. Among all these contradictions, we must clearly include the contradiction between capitalism and socialism, which the analogies between state socialism and state capitalism have often blurred. These analogies in no way obscure the differences between the two, but they can be confusing for knowledge and consciousness.
The archaic cultural attitudes of the Eastern bloc countries and their supervised pseudo-classicism, the snobbery and aestheticism of a bourgeoisie greedy for anything which looks new (the opposite of real innovations, these cosmetic renovations try to cap the genuinely new at source, pasteurizing it and doctoring it for their own consumption), the conflict between the apologia for labour in the East and the apologia for (exploited) leisure in the West, the competition between productivism geared towards socialist accumulation and productivism geared towards lining the pockets of the bourgeoisie – all these contradictions lead to extremes of confusion.

And let us add the contrast between the confusion and incoherence of the capitalist side and the excess of coherence (over-organization on every level of society) on the socialist side.

(d) Therefore, this picture of modernity is two-sided. On one side, accelerated technological progress, particularly in the socialist countries, victories over material nature, the rapid growth of cumulative processes in spite of saturation factors, the socialization of society. On the other side, relative stagnation of the everyday relations between men, including those who work within institutions (state, bureaucracy, mandarinate, etc.).

Hence the desynchronization of the human (internally, of subjectivity – externally, of labour and leisure) in relation to high technicity. Growing technological alienation, albeit unevenly spread between countries, sectors and regimes. Very little increase in individual possibilities, except for a few groups (directorate, technicians and technocrats, scientists, artists, astronauts, etc.).

Narrowness of everyday life made more apparent by technological control over nature, and by the worldwide character of the process of accumulation and of technicity. Suffocation at the heart of everyday life, of ‘private’ life; suffocation in culture and in anticulture, in antinature and in nostalgia for nature lost. Misguided search for a lifestyle via moralism and art, and therefore doomed to failure. Triumph of antinature (abstraction and signals) like some kind of supreme ordeal to be endured so that spontaneity (in microsocieties at first) may be rediscovered – if, that is, it has not been lost for ever.

(e) Collapse of traditional cultures through ruthless exploitation (commercial, propagandist, political). Enormous confusion between training, education and culture – between the accumulation of knowledge and creation. Massive pedagogical illusions. Profound aspirations diverted into aestheticism. Overestimation of art (as an externalized spectacle without any real participation). A frenzy of
WHAT IS MODERNITY?

aestheticism and aestheticism as alibi. The withering away of art behind its apparent triumphs. Bland character of novelties and ephemeral news. In fact, the elimination of spontaneity and play, in their deep sense as art, in favour of the functional, visible in particular in new towns (which concentrate the aleatory and the deficiencies of modernity).

(f) From this we can sketch out the main features of a sociology of modern boredom. It would draw attention to the ambiguity and internal dialectic of 'mass culture'. This culture raises the average level of people's culture; it helps to promote training, education, and above all, technicity. It is informative. It is interesting. At the same time it swamps people with information which is neutralized by its very quantity. It establishes a parallel between cultural and intellectual consumption and 'private' material consumption. It is voracious. It pillages culture's accumulated wealth. It endlessly exploits old symbols, myths, forms and styles. It transfers the totality of history into discourse, and shatters discourse with visual images. It engineers a cultural retrogression into biology and brute nature (by way of sex or violent body language). Its ersatz provocations accelerate the wear and tear upon experience, and blight the world of expressivity.

The threat of massive boredom hovers over us: exhausted themes, worn-out expressivity, universal pleonasm, spectacles which are monotonously 'private', etc.

The propagandist, superficial and artificial character of optimism (socialist or American).

Imminence of nihilism. Necessity for radical critique, either to avoid nihilism or to accelerate our awareness of it, if it really is upon us.

Urgent need for small groups and microsocieties to invent or create a style, given the present inability of classes and global societies to do so (and hence the importance and interest of new towns from this point of view).

Further arguments on modernity

Modernity has two contradictory aspects which are inextricably linked. It takes alienation as far as it will go. It supplements the old alienations with a new and increasingly cumbersome one: technological alienation. It turns the world topsy-turvy, yet it is still the real world. But at the same time, through all these extremes of alienation, the need for disalienation is all the more pressing and urgent. That, too, is being accomplished. Modernity caricatures and cashes in on the total revolution which never happened. Like it or not, badly and
clumsily, within the world which has been turned topsy-turvy and left that way, modernity is assuming the tasks of revolution: the critique of bourgeois life and of alienation, the withering away of art, morality, and ideologies generally, etc.

Let us comment upon these propositions in the light of what we said above.

Rifts, divisions and dualities are being exacerbated to the limit (private and public, the everyday and the sublime, needs and desires, nature and culture, nature and technology, sensual satisfaction and frustration, personal activities and social praxis). Another more philosophical list: being and thought, ideology and reality, representation and presence, ends and means, possibility and impossibility, etc.

Let us remind ourselves of what Marx, Engels and Lenin had to say. First, Marx: ‘the abstract reflected antithesis . . . is to be found only in the modern world’. By ‘reflected antithesis’ we must not understand reflection as meaning something simply intellectual or subjective; the concept Marx is referring to is not exactly ‘reflection’ in either sense of the word. Considered dialectically, each term of a duality or an antithesis reflects the other: it throws back not only a representation but also its own reality refracted through the reality of the other; through the other it receives a distorted reflection of itself, which emphasizes the difference and the gap between the two. This difference is polarized, but as yet it is not a profound contradiction, and even less an antagonism; it can become so, but not necessarily. Whether or not the structure thus defined falls apart depends upon the circumstances. Thus the state ‘reflects’ civil society – the needs, the interests and the relations of the members of non-political society; it constitutes a distinct but not an autonomous sphere; it is made up of more or less representative elements; at the same time it projects a distorted reflection of the members of society back into the very heart of their consciousness: a more or less misshapen representation. ‘Now as far as real life is concerned, it is precisely the political state which contains the postulates of reason in all its modern forms . . . But it does not stop there. It consistently assumes that reason has been realized’; it calls itself rational, yet slides into contradiction ‘between its ideal vocation and its actually existing premises’. And this is why the state is destined to come to an end: sooner or later, it will wither away.

But as long as there are bosses, masters and leaders, it will go on existing: ‘as long as the topsy-turvy world is the real world’.

Secondly, Lenin:

There are two ways of conceiving evolution . . . evolution as reduction and increase as repetition – or else this same evolution as a unity of opposites (the splitting of what is into two mutually exclusive principles and the
relations between these antithetical principles). The first conception is meagre, sterile and arid. The second is lively and creative.25

Lastly, Engels: 'The whole development [of civilization] moves in a continuous contradiction. . . . Every advance in production is at the same time a retrogression.'26

Let us put to one side the precise problem Engels's concise and generalized aphorisms are addressing (namely, the evolution of the family, marriage and the situation of women). It is also in relation to this problem that he declares that the irony of history is unfathomable! Engels and Lenin are completely in agreement in rejecting a simplistic representation of progress: a linear evolution, uninterrupted, equal for all sectors and advancing on all fronts, and advantageous right down the line.

What Engels is saying is that contradiction operates not only at the forefront of becoming but also deep within it, so to speak. Any particular victory or 'progress' can also be retrogressive up to a point. In each case, each set of circumstances and each situation, only analysis can show what was gained and what was lost, since gain and loss can happen simultaneously (and that could be one way of defining dialectic!).

When official Marxism tries to revive the ex-bourgeois notions of social progress and of progress as an ideal, is it merely applying its blunted dialectic on a 'shallow' concept?

If we are to take what Lenin wrote about dialectic seriously, everything which constitutes a whole is riven into two mutually exclusive, contradictory and conflicting 'principles'. This conflict is the most profound aspect of dialectical movement, but it should not make us overlook the relative unity of the whole. Thus social and economic development, the process of accumulation and modern industrialized society are split into two 'principles', and the conflict between them dominates our era. But we have no more right to parenthesize unity or interaction than we have to think of progress as something with only one side to it. On the contrary, we should regard becoming in a 'polyscopic' way.

To put it more precisely: to consider both socialism and capitalism as belonging to a unified worldwide process does not entail making them synonymous. To consider that there is no absolute difference between them – on the one hand, absolute 'positivity', on the other, absolute 'negativity' – does not mean that we have suppressed all the differences per se. And to imagine that it does would be a radically undialectical way of perceiving historical dialectic.

Nowadays, technological alienation is shared by socialism and
capitalism alike. Both sides are threatened by technocracy. However, we can discern social forces and theories on the socialist side which are perhaps capable of controlling the technical process, combating technological alienation and eliminating technocracy (and surely that is one of the political functions of Marxism–Leninism – but in that case why not say so once and for all, and stop trying to blur the contradictions of socialism? . . .).

These are areas in which objectivity is difficult to define, and even more difficult to sustain. In our opinion, being objective does not prevent us from being ironic, nor from taking up a position (a relative, therefore a critical one). The main difficulty comes from the overall attitude and total ideology adopted under the present circumstances by the ‘parties’ engaged in the struggle. Particularly on the Marxist and socialist side, the extremely undialectical principle of ‘all or nothing’ dominates policy and propaganda. Opting as such is no longer an option. Critique and irony are suppressed by decree, together with the relative and approximative character of choice and the risk of error or failure: in a word, the aleatory has been annihilated. Once it is submitted to the criterion of an absolute historical, economic and social determinism, opting *per se* is eliminated. The hypothesis of a ‘third way’ between capitalist ideology and socialist ideology is rejected out of hand. More contradictions. Not only does the status of ‘ideology’ as rejected by Marx’s critique become curiously inflated, but knowledge – scientific and critical objectivity – is adopted as the third way!

A historical situation where polemics and propaganda dominate is not a propitious one for knowledge. It is equally difficult for dialectic to function in a situation where the conflict between the contradictory elements and the fundamental contradiction itself threatens to annihilate the elements involved!

In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overwhelming it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men. . . . All our inventions and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into a material force. . . . We know that to work well, the new-fangled forces of society only want to be mastered by new-fangled men – and such are the working men. They are as much the invention of modern time as machinery itself. In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy and the poor prophets of regression, we do recognise our brave friend, Robin
Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer – the Revolution.\textsuperscript{27}

This text by Marx gives us much food for thought. First and foremost, though not simply, mastering technology means learning how to use the most sophisticated machinery. Such a restrictive interpretation opens the way for technocracy. What it really means is control of the cumulative process. But who can do this? Who can direct it towards man’s appropriation of nature and of his own nature? Revolutionaries and the revolutionary working class. But ‘the old mole’ working ‘in the earth so fast’ still has a long way to tunnel.

This text can also be applied to both ‘modern’ capitalism and ‘modern’ socialism, though in different ways. The world turned topsy-turvy is still the real world. Fetishes and illusions are just as real as the ‘real’. They are part of it. They are within it. Ideological reflections do not ‘reflect’ the real, they are its substance, its substitutes, its alibis. One of the intended outcomes of the rehabilitation of dialectical theory was that the topsy-turvy world would be turned the right way up again, and in practical terms; this has not been fully accomplished, only partially, and unevenly. Uneven development is all-pervasive.

Consequently: the real movement which eradicates this state of things (as Marx put it), namely Communism, is no longer in evidence. Even under socialism, man’s essence – his productive and creative labour, his knowledge and technicity – is still an imperfectly controlled power, one-sided, partially externalized and constraining; it stands in antithesis to man’s other essential aspects: sensual satisfactions, rest and leisure, games. Irony has not come to an end, nor has alienation. Actions produce ‘something other’ than what was intended. The gap between results and intentions is diminishing, or so they say; it would be nice to think so, but the only people who can believe it with any permanence or certainty are the faithful of the new creed: the cult of personality.

Over here on the bourgeois side, the world turned topsy-turvy still constitutes the real world, the only possible world – and shamelessly, ferociously so. From this perspective, the fundamental difference between socialism and capitalism is that under socialism there is a possibility that the world may be turned the right way up again; this possibility is already apparent, it is inherent, but of course it will be neutralized as soon as anyone claims that it has been accomplished.

The contradiction between two ‘worlds’, the real, topsy-turvy world and the possible world turned back the right way up, is approaching its point of maximum intensity. In this contradiction, these two ‘worlds’ interpenetrate and interfere one with the other. The internal
and external rifts and contradictions act to produce appearances which are ever closer to reality, and ever more ephemeral. They are illusions about illusions, ideologies about ideologies (e.g. aestheticism colonizing genuinely creative works, religiosity infiltrating radical critique, etc.). Divided social consciousness redisCOVERs an insecure and pregnant unity in false consciousness or bad faith; it comes together, then falls apart again, without ever being able to overcome its double determinations, without ever being able to call itself real.

Like the ghost of the Revolution which never happened over here, like the ghost of the Revolution which was never completed over there, modernity is in permanent crisis. It is riven with contradictions, and in the absence of the radically revolutionary negativity which – according to the initial Marxist project – would have transformed life, these contradictions are wreaking havoc. Moreover, the crises are more numerous, more frequent, more generalized. They are becoming normalized. Every sector and every area is about to have its crisis, or is in the middle of it. Increasingly numerous despite claims to the contrary, these multifarious crises would appear to be one of the constituents of modernity. They are becoming an integral part of its consciousness, its image, its self-promotion and self-projection. They are seen as fruitful, even by those who deny their existence; and the people who imagine themselves to be firmly established, like some kind of solid substance, are precisely the people who should be asserting the fruitfulness of contradictions, crises, and transition: the official Marxists! Are these crises really fruitful, and equally so across the board? There is no reason to believe that they are not, but equally there is no reason to believe the apologists of modernity when they insist that they are. But if we reject this absolute apologia for modernity, this does not mean that we must think that the apologists are absolutely wrong.

Is not the partisan stance which for scores of years has taxed bourgeois society with being sterile, impotent and decadent itself as sterile and impotent as the apologia it aims to criticize? It would be difficult to argue that our modernity is free from decadence and decline; but it would be highly dubious to maintain that it is characterized exclusively by the decline of bourgeois society, and that it is the manifestation of that decadence. The partisan stance is bankrupt. It is as difficult to define our modernity by decadence alone as it is to accept the snobbery of modernity and its unconditional triumphalism.

If modernity (our modernity) is unfolding as a series of crises, can we not think that these crises are the small change of the unique and total revolutionary crisis envisaged by Marx, which the radically negative and creative proletariat would have resolved in one historic action?
According to this proposition, some of the tasks and goals of total Revolution are being accomplished during the course of modernity, but badly or clumsily, in an indirect, fragmented, disguised and devious way, often in a topsy-turvy way— that is to say, within the world turned topsy-turvy—and always out of synch with what is possible. Thus we would define modernity as the ghost of revolution, its dispersal, and sometimes its caricature. So that it would be equally impossible either to reject it out of hand or to proclaim it. This definition could be applied generally, but unevenly; that is to say, it is valid for both the socialist and the bourgeois countries, but not in exactly the same manner. To put it another way: we are using the concept of uneven development to the full. We are applying it to everyday life, private life, morality, aesthetics, and not simply to the modalities of the cumulative process.

In a fragmentary way, modernity is accomplishing some of the tasks of revolution. Which ones? First, as we have said, a critique of bourgeois life in so far as it is abstract, split and torn apart. This critique operates by revealing the abstraction beneath the surface, the worsening splits and divisions, the ever more phoney contentment. Then the withering away of art, brought to full term by its destruction, its self-destruction, its internal negation. Then the withering away of philosophy per se, the discrediting of ideologies; then the elaboration of an idea of happiness, or even of a dubious ideology of happiness (which degenerates into an ideology of comfort and well-being, but goes on posing the question of happiness). Finally, via successive trial and error, the focusing of attitudes about technicity, nature, spontaneity.

Thus we have the outlines of a programme of action, which these pages will certainly not be able to flesh out. Their aim is merely to suggest a path for subsequent research. For that programme to be fulfilled— that is, to achieve a complete analysis and presentation of modernity—it would be necessary to scrutinize a considerable quantity of ‘modern’ French works. It would be appropriate to begin by classifying them methodically by theme, taking into account (but only up to a certain point) the tendencies expressed and the attitudes evinced (to the Left, to the Right, left-wing or right-wing cultural tactics, etc.). Once classification according to themes and problems was complete, a vast process of comparison would make modernity a precise, applicable concept.

The partition between us and what is possible is ever more fragile, translucent and impenetrable. Beyond the partition, ever closer, ever more inaccessible, lies...what? Not a double. Not a reflection. Much more: me, us, you.
How can we do otherwise than to opt for this possibility? Revolution, that old mole, has sprouted wings and flown away. Let us bring it back down to earth, back underground, where it belongs.

Revolution must be reinvented, but first we must recognize – re-cognize – it! Today, the Promethean spirit is alive in the words: ‘Revolution, like love, must be reinvented’.28
Towards a New Romanticism?

It requires courage to be a romantic, because one must take a chance.¹

When Stendhal announced important changes to literature and the art of living, the Restoration in France seemed secure, and moral order firmly established.

Between 1820 and 1825 he realized that the raw materials for something new and important were accumulating. It already had a name, but had not as yet taken shape.² He began by dealing with a specific problem of literary criticism, and wrote Racine and Shakespeare, a critical work of vital importance which goes far beyond the limits of literary criticism as such, and in which he attacks the customs and manners of the Restoration, announcing an alternative direction to that which social and political life in France was apparently taking in and around 1825. The great impetus towards revolution was growing stronger and stronger; soon it would surge into poetry and literature, and then into life itself:

The illusory picture of what the nineteenth century is looking for which the antiromantics are foisting on us is difficult to accept.... The last revolution stirred us to the depths of our souls.... At last, the great day will come when the youth of France will awake; this noble youth will be amazed to realize how long and how seriously it has been applauding such colossal inanities.³

What inanities? The ideas and manners of the Restoration – good form, seemliness, pedantry, good taste, the imitation of illustrious, wealthy and powerful people: moral order.

Today, in 1961, are we heading towards an analogous renewal in literature, and beyond literature? That is the question we intend to examine – inconclusively, no doubt – using Stendhal's book as our starting point, and attempting to reason, via similarities and differences between his times and ours.

Hesitantly, we will try to isolate its themes, applying and developing them in a way which will take us further and further away from
Stendhal and back again, going from the past to the present, and from what is possible – the future – back to the past. Let the reader who is likely to be put off by such a procedure be warned from the start. Like life, any journey into the unknown takes time, and patience. There seem to be a great many people who want to know what everything is about even before they start, who just want conclusions. They demand assertions followed by arguments which can be skipped because the conclusions have already been established. Something like Reader's Digest should keep them happy. Here such procedures are impossible: the author is following a certain direction, but he has no clear idea of where it will lead him. Join him in the quest – if not, don't bother to look. If you already know what 'modernity' is, if you have a theory about the modern world, if you are determined to carol its praises or to condemn it out of hand, if you have already adopted a system, stop reading this book now. If you go on reading it, you must agree to follow a winding path, with a few twists and turns here and there. You must allow the author to meander a bit. He promises – and it's his only undertaking – not to meander for ever.

There are numerous signs and indications that a recognizably new 'attitude' is on the way, and we can already indicate what some of them are: acts of verbal or physical insubordination, rebellions, revolts, protests, abstentions, people trying to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch, failures and disappointments understood (as far as possible) and taken on board. There is a growing sense of disorder, and its causes and effects are becoming more and more apparent. Although it is confused, it can be identified. It is youth in ferment – not simply here in France, but on a world scale. As yet the indications are all negative. The word 'disorders' implies 'orders' which the disorders have yet to overthrow. Are these negations sufficient for a definition, or do they merely hint at a new 'attitude' which must eventually challenge the theatrical and studied pose the word itself implies?

The famous precedent we are invoking can help us to specify several problems, clarify the situation and formulate certain notions, but it cannot offer no solution. Stendhal was a man of the nineteenth century, and he cannot help us choose between our various possibilities and impossibilities. The aleatory is immense: we are surrounded by it, threatened by it. But it by no means excludes distinctiveness and determinism. And that is why our critical examination of modernity must take care to distinguish between one possibility and another, opting, taking sides and weighing things up in a deliberately chosen way. Let us be quite clear before we start: we have no intention of adopting
Stendhal as a model. He is our starting point, our point of reference. We admit from the start that *Racine and Shakespeare* is of interest to us, and that it has remained topical, or has become topical again. But we will not imitate Stendhal. What we ask of him is a lesson in style, and we will learn that lesson by scrutinizing his bold, free – and inimitable – manner.

Some of the contradictions of the 1820s can be seen resurfacing nowadays. They are somewhat crude, the kind best deflated by humour. Here, as Stendhal saw them, are a few particularly savoury ones: while he was writing the letters and the essay which make up *Racine and Shakespeare*, he realized that he was surrounded by progressives and liberals who insisted on being classical. The French Revolution had donned the Roman toga and proclaimed itself in favour of the antique virtues, and this seems to have prepared the way harmoniously for the Empire, with all its memories of Caesarean grandeur. Romanticism was a foreign import from Germany and England, those most hated of countries. As for the first French romantics, they followed in the footsteps of Madame de Staël and Chateaubriand, and openly declared themselves to be royalists, legitimists, Catholics; in a word, reactionaries. It was when the ensuing confusion was at its height that Stendhal made the audacious announcement that romanticism was an indirect consequence of the Revolution, and that romanticism and revolutionary turmoil would soon become synonymous. This was the period which first introduced the fashion for headstrong passions, and in particular the vogue for extreme emotions. England had conquered France; however, if English poetry changed, becoming more enthusiastic, more serious, more impassioned, it was as a response to the French Revolution, which had put an end to eighteenth-century wit and frivolity. It is a surprising fact: the French who fought for the Revolution and in the Napoleonic Wars remained as they had been before the Revolution – proud, mercurial and sensitive, ‘always on the watch, always a prey to a fleeting emotion, and always incapable of deep feeling’. This situation could not last. A long tradition – and not only a literary one – had deformed the hearts and souls of Frenchmen; in Stendhal’s opinion, they were only just beginning to change. What was this tradition? The tradition of the royal court, of power, of the state. What the romantics suggested to Parisians, and to Frenchmen as a whole, was the most difficult thing in the world for them to do: to think about their habits, and to discuss them, when ‘the dread of obscure perils – perils that compel one to invent unusual and perhaps ridiculous courses of action – . . . makes moral courage so rare’.

So-called classical tragedy – the tragedies of Racine and Corneille –
is the virtually unshakeable cornerstone of French literary education. What does it consist of? A series of ritual actions, all very respectful, interspersed with epic narrations, even more respectful, declaimed by representatives of authority: princes, kings, military heroes, and the Lord of Hosts. The pleasure derived from these tragedies by audiences more used to the ‘unities’ than to freedom, and fond of hearing lofty sentiments churned out in beautiful Alexandrines, is epic rather than dramatic. Classicism thinks it is realistic, and wants to be realistic; it abhors fiction and the imaginary. Classical artists respect the real world, what they see as the real world – that is to say, the world as perceived via their personal quirks, habits and conceits. They are unable to distinguish between the real world and the marvellous presence conjured up by illusion. Classical art can be defined as an ‘art of mimesis’. It thinks it can imitate nature. But the word ‘nature’ is laden with contradictory meanings, and because classical art has mistaken its meaning, it deceives itself and its audience alike. Believing it was imitating nature, classicism imitated – and goes on imitating – a social nature: that which has been established as real, order installed or restored, the real as conceived by political and military power. Aesthetic imitation is the imitation of the court and of princes taken to its logical conclusion. The French Revolution was a gloomy affair, but there was one good thing about it: it was no longer the princes who cut out the ‘master pattern’ and owned the tailor’s dummy which ‘modelled’ it in the public square, but public opinion. For the French, happiness was no longer to be found in imitation.

How optimistic and confident Stendhal was! How naively he believed that youth could transform all the old patterns of behaviour! Men of 1961, let us take a good look. What do we see? It would matter little if the only thing was that children are still learning how to respect power and established order by reading Racine. But there is worse. The analogy goes farther – and how piquant it is! Today’s progressives (do we mean liberals, you ask? No, you haven’t caught on. We mean revolutionaries, the self-styled ones) are neoclassicists. They have made a great show of writing and publishing sonnets and Alexandrines. They have repudiated free verse as ‘a comb with its teeth broken’, and championed fixed forms. What is more, they have justified these repudiations and apologias by a double reference: to things as they are, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to freedom. Even someone with a free, critical and independent mind like Claude Roy considers that he has been formed by ‘commerce with the classics’. In the discussion printed in *Cercle ouvert* no. 11 which explores the contradictions of modernity in literature and philosophy, and its possibilities and impossibilities, he sees only one danger: that
art and literature should become too influenced by science fiction. As for Roger Vailland, a nonconformist writer if ever there was one, he has been almost too vociferous in his claim to be a disciple and an imitator of the classics (see his *Expérience du drame*, among other works). His novels are structured along the lines of classical drama, and are increasingly restricted to being ‘believable’ (see *La Loi, La Fête*, etc.).

So what has happened? This: imitation and imitative art did not come to an end in about 1830. People are still imitating. Some imitate the great princes of the world, kings, queens, fetishes and film stars. Others more generally imitate constructs and personalities. The cults of personality, of heroes, of leaders, of art works have produced some sorry results. O dialectic of history (objective dialectic, of course): the ex-revolutionaries have turned into the worst and most insipid kind of imitators. And not only in France. The virtue of imitation and imitation as a virtue are spreading ‘worldwide’.

Be it the result of a revolution or a restoration, every newly-established order needs a classicism by which to justify itself. Every state power exudes a dogmatism which fits neatly into the general order of things, and has a legitimizing function. Every bureaucracy, Church or state has had and always will have its philosophy, its system, its theory of being (its ontology), its criterion of what is and what is not. Regardless of their political ‘content’, institutions analogous to bureaucracy, the Church and the state want their own particular moral and aesthetic codes. The ways those in power reason are reasons of State. What did Stalinists and Zhdanovists talk about among themselves ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? Although no indiscreet ear was present at those high-strategy chinwags, we can hazard a guess:

‘The so-called modern arts — music, architecture, painting, theatre and literature — have run into difficulties. Their situation is critical, and they have lost all sense of direction. All their efforts at renewal end up in chaos. Today’s artists and writers are indulging in experimentation in a way that is worrying, even dangerous. Now we politicians and revolutionary leaders will have no truck with unnecessary complications; we have enough of them already, and in much more important domains than art, trapped as we are between the unruly peasantry and the slackening of the proletarian movement in the large industrialized countries. We must start by letting revolutionary romanticism fade quietly away; of course, we’ll still talk about it, because we must keep up appearances and never be seen going back on our word, but in moderation. Mayakovsky’s suicide bullet brought that period to an end. But classicism doesn’t know the meaning of the word “difficulty”. So, long live classicism! Long live realism! We will define realism not as an aesthetic theory but as an effective,
practical and useful method for action, and that will dispose of any awkward theoretical questions. . . . And in any case, didn’t Lenin write something about the people having the right to Greek columns? Consequently, we revolutionaries in power should decree the end of the romantic period and the revival of classicism, traditionalism, academicism, respectful realism and imitative art, all for superior political motives. And who gives a damn for dialectic! We eagerly urge our friends and partisans to follow us – first because in so doing they will save us and themselves a lot of trouble; secondly because they will find it easier to be accepted, recognized and legalized in the managerial structures of the formal democracy which the ebbing of the proletarian movement is making us come to terms with. . . . And now, there’s work to be done, so let’s put our hearts into it, it’s the heart that counts, and talent too, lots of it . . . !’

Obviously this little speech was never made. It is a summary, not an explanation; but it needs to be explained. Things must have happened in a different way, more slowly, more surreptitiously. Those in power (the Stalinists) did not simply wake up one fine morning and decide to do away with revolutionary romanticism. It had been on the way out for years, with the hardening of circumstances, the increasingly serious and pressing economic problems, the economic plans, bureaucratization, the strengthening of the state and the reduction in revolutionary possibilities. Nobody ever simply decided to move from romanticism to neoclassicism, or from revolutionary critique to dogmatic ideology. It happened by itself, through situation and circumstance. Neoclassicism was not imposed by diktat. But for those most closely involved, it was like the answer to a prayer. Among the numerous elements to be taken into account on the ‘cultural’ level we are examining, would not bad taste be one? A revolution gives some very decent and admirable folk access to culture as well as to prominent positions, but good taste is not necessarily one of their prominent attributes. Taste exists, good taste and bad; this Stendhalian proposition irritates some of the more rabid partisans of socialist realism, and a good job too!10

Reasons of State have no need for analysis or theory, let alone taste. This does not stop them from holding the neoclassical virtues in the highest regard: decency and respect, balance, peace of mind, strong shoulders, crystal-clear conscience, unwavering optimism, ostentatiously good health, joyful serenity, consent; in a word, the virtues of moral order. And now, what is there left for us but to join forces with Stendhal in hoping that young people, and more generally the ‘men of culture’ (i.e. of taste), will take these virtues and turn them to ridicule?
According to Stendhal, the burgeoning romantic movement (in France) contained the seeds of a new comic mode. It would be inspired by Shakespeare and Aristophanes. In Shakespeare, kings have clowns as companions, and every prince has a fool at his side to bring him down to a human level. Our classicism had its comic mode and its satirists. Stendhal lets us in on the secret of classical laughter: 'All Louis XIV's subjects prided themselves on imitating a certain model in order to be elegant and de bon ton; and Louis XIV himself was the god of that religion. There was a sarcastic laugh when one saw another person make a mistake in imitating the model.' Classical laughter, sarcastic laughter, is careful not to question established order - moral, ideological and political. And Molière? He makes people terrified of not being like everyone else. This tendency in Molière was probably the political motive which made him such a favourite with the king. The court demanded free and consenting fidelity; now and again it was capable of being witty. Anyone who deviated from the model provoked laughter (sarcastic laughter) for displaying stupidity. And as for 'laughing one's head off', the rire fou for which Stendhal believed romanticism would rediscover the key, that vengeful laughter, the free laughter of liberation, subversive, the laughter of Shakespeare, Rabelais, Aristophanes - was there anyone in the France of 1825 who had the slightest idea what it meant?

In Stendhal's estimation Aristophanes was far and away a greater writer than Molière. Here, curiously, our French analyst comes face to face with the German philosopher of totality. For Hegel, because they were not weighed down with overseriousness, the Athenians were able to rise to a level of the utmost seriousness: the realm of freedom, where the mind finds consolation and joy in its own inner serenity. Hegel made a distinction between characters who were comical in themselves and for themselves, and characters like Molière's who were comical for the audience; only in the first instance can true comedy be found, and it is the genre in which Aristophanes excels. Hegel reckons that more often than not Molière's 'subtle comedies' degenerate into jokes and 'bitterness of tone'. The Miser is a play in which passion is so circumscribed that it keeps the soul trapped in the narrowest of limits, and there is nothing really comic about it at all. As for Stendhal, he considers that the Athenians of Antiquity had very French qualities - more so than nineteenth-century Frenchmen themselves, who had allowed those qualities to wane. Lightweight and likeable, eager for pleasure, those Athenians had their own way of appreciating freedom. Molière knew nothing about freedom. And what is more: his satire makes freedom seem disgusting, something that the oh-so-frequently-denounced immorality of his plays disguises:
'Comedy . . . is like music: it is a thing whose beauty does not last. The comedy of Molière is too steeped in satire to give me very often the sensation of gay laughter, if I may so express it. When I go to the theatre for entertainment, I like to encounter a madcap imagination that makes me laugh like a child.'\textsuperscript{12}

Hegel, Stendhal – how captivating such encounters are! Wandering whither his principles lead him – analysis, taste, pleasure – Stendhal meets Hegel coming from the opposite direction – system and totality. In this match between a subtle, refined mind and a vast, rigorous one, it's ‘advantage Stendhal': he anticipates, while Hegel's systematic mind remains absorbed in drawing up a balance sheet of world history.

An objection: wasn't Aristophanes a reactionary and Molière a ‘progressive'? Maybe. But if so, it is yet another proof that a work of art cannot be defined by its political content alone, or adequately judged by the criterion of politics. Political content and political criteria are important, but we should never overestimate them and mistake the trees for the wood. Yes, it is probably true that Aristophanes' tomfooleries cocked a snook at Athenian democracy; they barred the way to Socrates' irony, and were probably instrumental in paving the way for the trial which led to his execution. Yes, but did not Aristophanes stand for man as he was before the division of labour and trades, before the conflicts of position and opinion from which Socrates attempted to extract a truth? Caught up in the changing conditions and situations of a society which was superseding them and leaving them behind, men were turned into peasants or citizens, artisans or merchants, shoemakers or sycophants, but they still retained their links with their gods, their myths, their destiny, and they had not yet become the dupes of their own social roles; so they could still laugh at themselves. It was a laughter which destroyed the questioning and reasoning rationality of Socrates and the philosophers to come; but it retained the memory and the requirement of something more, something better than the division of labour, intellectual analysis and maieutic. Laughter is more profound than irony; laughter unleashes forces beyond the scope of reason. In their own particular ways, both Hegel and Stendhal understood this. Laughter is close to beauty. It is divine. Like music.

But one must know how to laugh! Could we laugh at the future nowadays as Aristophanes and his audiences laughed at the past? Alas, the proletarian revolution was once capable of making people laugh their heads off, but that finished when Mayakovsky died.\textsuperscript{13} Revolution became respectful. Apparently people still laugh under socialism, but at the circus or at puppet shows rather than in the
theatre, where the occasional peal of sarcastic, satirical laughter can nevertheless still be heard. In France in 1961, the situation is even worse. Our laughter has a grating edge, it is the uncertain laughter provoked by puns and wordplay and ideas we only half believe in. This bitter laughter bursts out when someone shows us our own image, ugly, contorted, gesticulating like a drunk (but stone-cold sober).\textsuperscript{14}

Contemporary experience is renewing the distinction between classicism and romanticism (a distinction which should not be taken academically as an absolute, but as a conflict between tendencies) and is giving it a new lick of paint, so to speak. For the last thirty years we have been somewhat taken aback to see the revolutionary movement changing track towards classicism. In this very year, 1960, in France, it has come as no surprise to us that since Ionesco’s play \textit{Rhinoceros} has been performed in an official theatre, he has been congratulated for at last abandoning (abstract or non-figurative) antitheatre for figurative, neoclassical theatre.\textsuperscript{15} In the very same year, 1960, someone thought fit to stage Jean Genet’s \textit{The Balcony} as a realist and classical play.\textsuperscript{16} For a long time the words on everyone’s lips were: antiliterature or aliterature, antipoetry or apoetry, antinovel or antitheatre. A few years go by, and suddenly the outsider discovers he is a neoclassicist. So it’s back to work, and to being successful again! We will attempt to see clearly through all this considerable confusion by introducing certain perspectives. Suffice it for the moment to mention that certain works are not born classics, but have classicism thrust upon them. Those in power find that the classicism which time has mellowed, aged and tamed is very useful: immortal works which death has at last transformed into their very selves.\textsuperscript{17} One word says it all: academicism. Such are the ideological needs of state power, regardless of its social ‘base’ or political ‘content’. Knowing this, certain writers and artists prepare themselves accordingly. They create with posterity in mind, placing themselves in relation to the future, and imagining that their judgement and creativity can be used according to perennial norms. They view their work and their lives according to circumstance and historical distance. Stendhal’s attack on the grand century of Louis XIV did not go so far as to be a fundamental critique of the authority of state power, but his irony was nevertheless extremely effective, and it is still inestimably useful to us; and if anyone objects that ‘under Louis XIV the state was progressive, it contributed to national unity and to the early stages of capital accumulation’, there is only one possible reply: ‘Of course, but that has nothing to do with what we’re talking about! Beneath that political façade of yours lurks an asinine Philistine; if you want to mount an apologia for Stalin, why not use Peter the Great? He would be just as
useful as Louis XIV. Politicizing culture in this way only reveals how much you despise it. . . .'

When Stendhal begins calling for a national prose tragedy, his proposals begin to lose their interest for us. At this point we reach the frontier beyond which differences become more significant than similarities. For 1823, Stendhal's position was certainly audacious; the 'national tragedies of deep and lasting interest' he expected could only have taken their inspiration from models with the most tenuous of links with French national feelings (Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe), while classical tragedy had become an integral part of this feeling of nationhood.

I address myself fearlessly to those misguided young people who believed they were being patriotic and defending the national honour when they hissed Shakespeare because he was English. Since I am full of esteem for hard-working young people, the hope of France, I shall talk to them in the severe language of truth.19

What did Stendhal want? A national crucible in which to achieve the high-temperature fusion of elements borrowed from foreign cultures (which had been victorious in 1815) with elements taken from the history and traditions of France. Rescuing English and German works which to a certain extent had become 'classical' fossils in their own countries, this fusion was to incorporate them in the upsurge of romanticism in France, smashing through the narrow-minded attitudes of the chauvinists and the prejudices of the liberals to produce a new, national culture.

What is wrong with this programme? Why not use it as a model nowadays?

To begin with, to a certain extent, it was put into action when romanticism was at the height of its success. For example, although de Musset's *Lorenzaccio* is set in Italy, in Florence, and in the sixteenth century, it is really about France, the French Revolution, and the Restoration. It is a tragedy about revolution and freedom, and it carries out Stendhal's programme much better than Hugo's *Cromwell* or *Le Roi s'amuse*. But because de Musset's plays were misunderstood and ignored for so long, it is possible that Stendhal was unable to recognize himself in them.

Operations like these - fusions, transplants, assimilations - need favourable conditions if they are to succeed. Without such conditions, they are courting disaster. Today we could well use Stendhal's suggestions in response to those people who maintain that all Soviet art and literature is completely useless and invalid. What right do
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these chauvinists have to dismiss things which could be fruitful for our national culture? The most original cultures have always welcomed a wide range of outside influences with open arms. The vitality of a culture is measured by its ability to assimilate. The epic mood of the great Soviet works of art (Sholokhov, for example), and even the humble heroes of labour and their humble epics (although they are slightly exaggerated by ‘art’), cannot leave us indifferent. Nevertheless, it is true that the brutal attempt to import the much-lauded Soviet ‘socialist realism’, by diktat of the Mufti and at a time fixed by propaganda and political expediency, has been a failure. Even worse: it has wrought havoc on French culture. Cultural alarums and political excursions in this domain have left behind a blood-drenched wasteland. ‘Campaigns’ (against painting, the novel, poetry, science, etc.) – one might almost call them hit-and-run attacks – have been drummed up on military lines, like the Golden Horde: a small but dedicated group of hatchet men, under orders from a distant Khan! The Horde sweeps on its way. What is left? Scorched earth, ashes, corpses caught in their final gesture of defiance. And shame. More modestly put: to overestimate conformist works of art does disservice to an enterprise which could have proved fruitful, if other methods (more persuasive and more discreet, operating at depth) had been deployed.

Today, Stendhal’s project for historical drama raises other objections. History, the historical? We men of the second half of the twentieth century are fed up to the back teeth with it. We have lived through many historic hours, far too many; too often have we felt the passing winds of destiny; we run too much of a risk of being reminded of them to want to see them used as a means for renewing art. There are certain blinkered pedagogues who use Marxism as a justification for treating us like naughty schoolchildren forced to keep our eyes on the blackboard. But there is something sickening about history as a spectacle, and the notion of history as action requires a great deal of patience – too much – and a lot of mutilations. The philosophy of history ends up making the very thought of history unbearable. The History (to give it the capital letter it deserves) which so disappointed Merleau-Ponty, although even he never stopped believing in its future ‘pulsations’ and meanings, has also disappointed many others.20 As time goes by, this disappointment is reducing the significance of dates and presences. Nothing happens exactly as planned (and is not that what historical dialectic is, the dialectic of the planned and the unplanned, the foreseen and the unforeseen? This happens in spite of people who deliberately go on confusing dialectic with determinism, and people who use the unforeseen as an argument against
dialectic). Might history be crazy? Perhaps. But unfortunately, finding an institutional straitjacket strong enough to hold it is quite a problem. So let’s keep quiet about it, but don’t let’s forget about it, because we need to be prepared for the crazy dramas to come. And we need to realize that the ‘world’, our little planet, is being transformed. The *world* revolution – through which the world will become a ‘world’ – is happening, in ways which are stranger, richer and more unexpected than were ever imagined a century ago. And this is all the more true in that the ‘world’ has become ‘worldwide’ only because it has been superseded by the cosmic adventure.

Certain eminently gifted men have allowed themselves to become obsessed with history. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, who sees the relation between individual ‘living’ and history (between the individual level and the historical level) as the crucial problem which will give philosophy a new lease of life. Now in effect, the contrast between these ‘levels’ or ‘scales’ – the ‘lived’ and the historical – is a striking one. But it is no more or no less so than the contrast between the huge range of individual and technological action on the one hand, and on the other hand the mean-spirited yet infinitely rich pettiness of private life, confronting each other like the panels of a diptych. To pivot one’s thought and perspective on this contrast means introducing the deceptive themes of vague and generalized guilt about history, bad conscience and bad faith as phenomena which enjoy some kind of philosophical (ontological) status. These men want to assume responsibility for history one day, and to wash their hands of it the next; to make history today, and to abandon it tomorrow. In his recently published *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), Jean-Paul Sartre has attributed history with one philosophy (Marxism) and ‘the lived’ with another (existentialism) – one for global determinism, the other for events *per se*. He bends over backwards to confront them and reconcile them by linking the two levels ‘dialectically’. In this way he takes the duality we must all suffer between private life and political life, and elevates it to the realm of philosophy.

In and around 1825, after the great revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Stendhal believed in history. Like Hegel, like Balzac, he saw it as the great educating principle. This did not make him give up the search for pleasure in his private life, and he seems to have been unaware of the potential discord between these two levels of his experience. In an old state-controlled and military country, and probably – a fact that is only too apparent – more state-controlled and military than democratic (yes, I’m talking about France), this ideology of history is tenacious, inevitable and understandable. On the other hand, Stendhal was already challenging those in power, and
thus by implication he was also challenging the state and the political relations between the citizen and the authority of the state.

If we now turn to Marxist thought, we will notice that, contrary to what is often imagined, Marx challenged history. That is to say, he asked questions about its validity and its essence. Once he has demonstrated the historicity of human beings, he has no hesitation in challenging the history which was happening above their heads. This he situated in what he termed the prehistoric era. In the same way, rather than awarding it his ‘certificate of philosophy’, he challenged the authority of the state in its very essence, questioning the process by which it unfolded; he analysed it, he criticized it and he judged it; he did not feel himself to be challenged by history, nor did he feel obliged to legitimize it. He placed himself beyond history (unreservedly supported, it is true, by his theory of the proletariat) – or rather, as he saw it, within history as it really was; and from the vantage point of what was possible he judged what had already been accomplished. It is precisely here that he differs from Hegel, and dialecticizes the systemized Hegelian concept. History and power are perceived as alienations of the human, a series of alienations and disalienations through which man must pass, but they must be superseded, and they will take their meaning from that supersession. Man’s history and historicity become rational and understandable only in the context of the process of economic accumulation; yet history and the process of accumulation are not the same thing. Accumulation follows its already complex trajectory, and around it history curls itself like some baroque scroll. What is more, the cumulative process is far from being entirely ‘positive’ and creative. It is destructive. It negates things, and when it does so, negativity is not always negated as a consequence; although it cannot help being destructive, it nevertheless does destroy many beautiful and majestic realities: cultures, civilizations, bodies of wisdom and forms of life. And it is only after this process has been completed, when the prehistoric era has come to an end, that the meaning of these realities will become fully apparent. Then true history will begin, with the transparency of society, of the present and of the past. As for relations with politics and power, they will always contain an element of constraint and deception. Marx’s thought cannot be reduced to the level of an economism (an economic determinism), a pure and simple historicism, or a philosophico-political system. The sphere of power can have no authenticity, and nor can history (or rather, man’s prehistoric era), for they are both domains where alienation reigns supreme.

Despite his speculative efforts to reduce its scope, Sartre sanctions
the duality which Marx proposed to supersede by praxis. Obsessed by history and the people who make it, he is mesmerized by authority. He fails to take up Marxist thought at its conceptual source: the connection between power (the state) and the systemization of philosophy, between the state and speculative ontology, between specific praxes and specific ideologies. Therefore he never challenges philosophy, or authority, or history as prehistory. He ignores Marx's fundamental theory of the withering away of the state—or he has until now. What he would like (ideally) is a sort of authenticity in the spheres of power and history, to which the philosopher would lend his authority. He uses power and history to parenthesize alienation in the historical and the political. The certificate of authenticity he deigns to grant them would gratify the 'absolutist' Stalinists' dearest wish, the wish that condemns gullible people first to disillusionment, then to nihilism.

When Sartre the playwright turns to the problem, he writes historical and neoclassical plays (such as Altona, a historical tragedy in five acts about Germany and the German as warrior). This neoclassicism bears witness to Sartre's acceptance of the sphere of power as a possible sphere of meaning and a possible authenticity. This was something Marx rejected and something which Stendhal had already challenged by the simple means of the subjective 'mind', by the use of irony.

The question about history and historical drama leads us to the question of epic. Stendhal rejects epic in favour of drama, and in this he coincides with Hegel (again), for whom drama supersedes epic and the lyric by subsuming them. Was he right? And what should we make of it?

We must admit that in 1961 there are several new reasons for us to be wary of epic. Epic is a liar, and it does not even try to be beautiful any more—beauty, that complete illusion. It lies by flattering the vanity of fools. It inflates them in their own eyes by making them participate in lofty sentiments and actions, proudly proclaimed in respectful style. The dilemma is a curious one: people are taken in when they participate, and are disappointed and anxious when they don't.

Haven't we all been charmed and taken in by the epic tone at some time or another? The Napoleonic epic (well now, what about Stendhal? Could that be why he was so wary of epic? Wasn't he always a confirmed Jacobin and Republican?), the colonial epic, the socialist agricultural epic under Stalin, feats of epic derring-do, princes, generals, leaders positively incandescent with genius, Ivan the Terrible, Alexander Nevsky, the 'General Line' (Eisenstein, oh that
sublime cheat, with the epic images of his *Ivan the Terrible*, grandiose and infantile, reduced to nothingness by parody!)

Will we be able to revive Stendhal’s programme and bring it up to date, with the watchword or slogan: ‘Down with epic! Long live drama!’?

But wait a minute! Epic was something of a con trick, true, and there are more where that came from. But do not some of the greatest novels – Balzac’s, for instance, and Stendhal’s – keep epic going by superseding it? Was not Hegel right when he called the novel the epic of the modern bourgeoisie? And then, and above all, there is Brecht, and epic theatre, and the Brechtian aspiration to epic. What is epic according to Brecht? It is the long, patient and interminable activity of men, humble men, under the surface of their everyday lives, presented without miserabilism. It is antihistory and antipower. What does *Mother Courage* demonstrate – the misfortunes of war? An accurate interpretation, maybe, but superficial and propagandist. Brecht’s play shows how violence, constraint and power ruin their own bases, slowly but implacably, by producing poverty, ruin, injustice and despair. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* the rival collectives do not call upon the state to settle their differences, but do so among themselves, according to old peasant customs. In *Galileo*, when the spiritual powers degrade the eponymous hero, they reveal their own ignominiousness. They stand for eternity, but he has time on his side. They have authority, but he has knowledge.

To sum up: Brecht’s is the epic of the withering away of the state. And that is why Brecht the Marxist, the revolutionary, the Communist, the only great playwright of the Stalinist era, has never been completely understood or accepted by his peers!

And here is something else to consider. Even though we may be afraid of it and wary of it, there is such a thing as an epic of technology: yesterday, earth conquered, ravaged, controlled; today, worldwide industrialization and technicity; tomorrow, the intergalactic epic, the conquest of the cosmos, with all its unknown potentials!

Science fiction explores these possibilities, or tries to. It explores all of them, the best and the worst, cosmic disasters and Lands of Lost Content, machines which organize the world, which create other machines (and even machines which go to war with each other), and then the return to the primitive horde instinct. A modern form of the imaginary, science fiction does not permit a choice of possibilities. Moreover, more often than not it works by transposing the oldest of metaphysical themes: immortality, identification, action or communication by distant powers, talismans (numbers, signs). We do not know, and persist in not knowing, what the cosmos holds in store for
us. If there are sentient monsters – as there are in some science fiction – they must think logically just like us, with the principle of identity, with dichotomy, disjunction, difference. Yes, no doubt, but if the principle of identity produces sentient monsters, as the abusive use of logic and semantics – sometimes disguised as dialectic – already seems to have done down here on earth, what conclusions are we to draw? Perhaps we are already surrounded by cybernated human robots who have built robot-machines in their own image, only less dangerous. And in our journeys to other planets and other galaxies, what if we were at last to meet up with other human beings?

There must be an explanation for the relative inability of our minds and our imaginations to grasp the possibilities of technology and the limitlessness of space and time. Why does science fiction draw so heavily on metaphysics and magic? Were they not the science fiction of the pre-scientific age? Why go on using their signs and their symbols? Let’s face it, ‘modern’ man needs them to prop up his flagging imagination. But even taking this inability into account, the conflation of the terms ‘planet’, ‘earth’, ‘worldwide’, ‘world’ and ‘universe’ is still rather ridiculous. Mounting a critique of the confusions surrounding the term ‘world’ may be increasingly a key issue for reflective thought. Nevertheless, because of its vastness and the feelings of expectancy, suspense and anxiety it evokes in us, the ‘world’ – or, if you prefer, the universe – is not about to lose its epic grandeur.

Stendhal preferred drama to epic because the enjoyment of epics entailed pomposity, elegant declamations, and those noble, big-hearted and lofty sentiments which are music to the ears of a mean-spirited audience and bread and butter to the ham actor. It is admiration which leads people astray and alienates them. The spectacle of heroic action – that is, heroic action converted into a narrative spectacle in the heroic mode – is fascinating, mesmerizing and deceptive. We imagine ourselves to be endowed with the sublime sentiments narrated by the author, embodied by his characters and brought to life by the actor. We become part of the action; we are spectators, but we lose ourselves in the illustrious characters, and in so doing we fool ourselves about what we really are. These are all vices which drama would eschew.

For the modern reader, Stendhal is no longer convincing. From the hindsight of Brecht’s theatre, one could argue that in his way, Racine introduced a distancing effect. Drawing his inspiration from the royal court and the king’s love life, from the political events and intrigues of the time of Louis XIV, he transfers the action to Antiquity, or to a distant land (Bajazet, for example). But that is a mere detail. Today we have been so swamped with drama and history that we must
surely have learned by bitter experience how powerfully deceptive drama can be. It is every bit as skilful as epic. Our lives have been lived amid overdramatized trivialities, from short news items to great world events. The politico-ideological exploitation of real dramas is unending. Can there be anyone who does not want to see real-life situations dedramatized? A typical overdramatized response nowadays would be to stop living one’s life for fear of the H-bomb, pretending that rockets and bombs are like the Last Judgement, the ultimate philosophy, by which man and the human are already parenthesized. This is partly an exaggeration, and the worst mistakes come from exaggerations or trivializations of a given truth. The fact that mankind is plumbing the depths of the abyss, and that the earth is in danger of annihilation, does not mean that we should act as if nothingness were already swallowing us up. Every time we act as if it were, the chances of annihilation increase. We must dedramatize. And in fact this dedramatizing is happening spontaneously, in an unorganized way. People look for it in political apathy, entertainment, and a kind of unreality. There are writers and artists to prepare the way and help them along. How can we bear the atomic threat unless we remove a part of the drama from ‘living’ by adopting a kind of indifference which sometimes borders on the imbecilic or the comatose? It is a type of self-defence.

Yes, but sooner or later dedramatizing will be pushed to such an extreme that it will supersede its unconscious aim. Dramatizing transforms every anecdote and every little news item into an exciting ‘story’ (and presents it as such). Conversely, dedramatizing desymbolizes: by demystifying, it designifies. It depersonalizes. It strips the helpless consciousness naked, and confronts it with objects and things. It reduces life to a string of objects, neutralizing emotions and passions. It reaches zero temperatures, the total coldness of the nouveau roman and the ‘novel of objects’ of recent years. Will we steer a clear course between a dramatizing Scylla and a dedramatizing Charybdis? Will we invent new forms of participation which will no longer make fools of us?

So let us disagree with Stendhal – no more dramas. But this means that we will be more receptive to a certain type of epic, in the tradition of Brecht, and not so very different from that of Victor Hugo...\(^{22}\)

Stendhal had it in for epic, because it cannot create a complete illusion. We do not get carried away by it. It evokes no deliciously melancholic reveries, no passionate dreams. The imperfect illusion proceeds paradoxically by a series of identities and identifications; we might say that it alienates. It produces a false or distorted consciousness. According to Stendhal, epic’s imperfect and deceptive illusion
eliminates what we would nowadays call presence: the presence brought by music because music delights the listener, and in so doing restores him to his own being, to his profoundest truths: to his dreams.

And this brings us to the crux of the matter. Proposition number one: Stendhal’s aesthetic is based primarily on music. Dramatic opera, such as Mozart’s, gave him a marvellous gift: complete illusion. Point number two: when Stendhal talks about the ‘complete illusion’, he means beauty. But what has happened to this musical inspiration subsequently, for him and for us? And what has become of the beauty which ‘tender and overexcited souls’ discover in Plato? Yes, these are the fundamental questions – well, a few of them, at any rate. Above all, we must avoid rushing things. Let us present the ideas sequentially, listing them in as rigorous an order as possible. And let us imitate Stendhal the essayist, whose seemingly artless meanderings so artfully conceal a precise and rigorous method. Let us try to grasp the similarities and differences between that already distant era and our own, one by one. Let us thrust our hesitating hands into the jumble of daily news, into the jungle of contradictions: the branches we grasp at random will be laden with promises, buds, shoots, dried leaves, withered flowers, poisonous fruits and other succulents.

Henri Beyle, alias Stendhal, openly took the pleasure principle as his starting point. Whatever its genre, the work of art should afford the highest possible pleasure (things being what they are, according to the famous principle of things, and people too!). In this Stendhal was a man of the eighteenth century. He accepted its philosophy, the philosophy of the materialists and ‘idéologues’, as a philosophy of physical enjoyment rather than a philosophy of matter (an ontology). Towards the latter he was supremely indifferent. Because of the Revolution and the Empire, with their epic and sublime pretensions, the French had abandoned the philosophy of the eighteenth century in favour of classical moralism, and Stendhal could not forgive them for doing so. He was so much a partisan of pleasure that he would blame his fellow-citizens (and in no uncertain terms) for everything in art and in behaviour which was not conducive to pleasure, or simply afforded ersatz pleasures. Most importantly, he took them to task for their vanity, which was connected with classicism first by actual imitation (of the great figures at the royal court), then by the theory of imitation (art as mimesis), and finally – trivially – by habits of behaviour. ‘And what is worse, we have the vanity to maintain that these bad habits are rooted in nature.’

In Stendhal, if not in what subsequently became known as ‘Beylism’, the pleasure principle is transformed. It is alive; it is not a static principle, a fixed image. It is metamorphosed into a principle of
action and creativity. Here I trust the reader will allow me to translate Stendhal into modern jargon. Pleasure is never useless and sterile; there is a very old theory that sensual delight must be seen as part of the act of fertilization; it is its reward, its crowning moment, its *raison d'être*, although it has no rational relation with this insemination. But how much more than the pleasures of physical love is passionate love! Passionate love craves pleasure too, nothing but pleasure; through agonies of pain it reproduces pleasure again and again, it intensifies it; transformed into joy, the physical pleasure which lasted but a brief instant now fills time itself. What does passionate love crave? Presence, the presence of beauty, the promise of happiness. Passionate love – love crystallized – and the sudden desire for a fresh young peasant girl encountered in the countryside have nothing but a vague word in common. Art and literature can be compared to passionate love. Useless? No. They have a use, but not simply as something to be bought and sold. Their first use is as a weapon against moral order, and although the effectiveness of the wounds they inflict on it should not be overestimated, they are nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. They are useful for men individually and in groups: youth, for example, or peoples, or nations, who are trying to find their own selves. And above all, they are useful in that they afford pleasure. But just as passionate love goes beyond physical desire and 'sexual need' (what dismal cant!), so works of art surpass all these 'uses'. The will to power of individuals and groups, which finds expression in their written or spoken messages and in their acts of mutual defiance, is but a pinpoint in the intensification of living which the work of art carries ever farther and ever higher. The work of art craves beauty, and brings beauty. Pleasure from beauty becomes one of the useful services rendered (part of the ‘ideological function’ or ‘social function’) and it transforms them, without jeopardizing the autonomy of the pleasure principle itself.

The work of art implies a gamble, a gauntlet thrown down by a group, or an individual who embodies that group, to other groups. Art is like a game; not solitaire, which is played for its own sake, but roulette, where the stakes and the risks are high. In 1825, which group was winning at the tables? Precisely the group which asserts itself by demanding the greatest pleasure, pleasure all its own, pleasure triumphant: youth. In the French nation, left reeling by defeats and failures, an ardent, avid, dissatisfied youth was assuming responsibility for its own dreams and ideals. But how much was it betting? And what were the ultimate stakes? Women, wealth, power – those were what ascendant youth aimed to win, seizing them from their current owners and turning them against them, extracting the maximum
enjoyment from them, and stopping at nothing to achieve them: rape, violence, cunning, passions worthy of the Italian Renaissance. The urge to gamble their futures made these young men thoughtful, active and creative. In 1823 and 1825, Stendhal could not have predicted with any degree of accuracy what was to happen. The youth of France versus the world – it would be crazy to wager on the outcome of such a dangerous game. But he did wager. And he won.

Today, in 1961, can we bring the pleasure principle back as a foundation, a starting point, and believe in the creative virtues of pleasure? The idea is certainly attractive. Sometimes the boredom which certain aspects of ‘modernity’ exude like some kind of radioactivity is so immeasurably appalling that a return to the pleasure principle seems highly desirable.

But is it possible? Does the pleasure principle still have any meaning? Most of our joys and desires have been ruined for us. All that remains are satisfied needs, and even there. . . . We French men and women of the second half of the twentieth century – bourgeois or antibourgeois – are serious, very serious, and distinguished, are we not? But our seriousness is not always distinguishable from superficiality, or our distinction from coarseness. Stendhal’s pleasure had a style. It was a style. It still had something of the eighteenth century about it. Was this style aristocratic? Bourgeois? Popular and Jacobin? Who could say for sure? It was the result of a history. As a result of our history we have lost pleasure as a style and pleasure as a habit. We have certainly retained a great deal of vanity, and the gift of imitation; but we have scarcely any habits of our own any longer, good or bad; what habits we have are American or Russian imitations. Spontaneity has vanished; even the hope of one day finding it again seems gone for ever. As for naivety, so necessary a part of Stendhal’s pleasure, we all despise it, almost from the moment we are born, mistaking it for stupidity. Is there anyone who would not be mortified to discover that he had retained even the most minimal amount of it? It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the artificial and the natural. Witness the obsessive eroticism – which Stendhal hated so much – which is gaining dominance in the guise of pleasure against a triple background of frigidity, moralism and illusory liberation, and which leaves the moral order virtually unruffled.

Even vanity has lost much of its vitality. It used to be something solid, a value to stimulate the spirit of free enterprise, but now it is evaporating. It makes do with the basic minimum needed to keep up appearances. Except on the political level, perhaps.

As for the pleasure principle taken theoretically, how are we to disengage it from the much more ‘modern’ principles of nothingness,
TOWARDS A NEW ROMANTICISM?

cruelty and fascination? Nowadays the discussion on the relations between nature and culture which at one time was so passionate, wide-ranging and ‘sociable’ is limited to specialists in philosophy or in one or other of the related sciences, people who have no hope of ever intervening. In the conflict between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ (or society), culture and the social are relegated to the realm of abstraction, and nature adopts the status of an inert object. The relation between them becomes alienated; eventually it coagulates and becomes reified. Supposing that one day theoretical discussions finally succeed in reviving the pleasure principle as a principle shared both by nature and by culture, then by what mediation will we pass from theory to practice?

It gets worse. At the heart of the society called – with some justification – ‘bourgeois’, in so-called ‘modern’ art, boredom goes hand in hand with a remorseless search for sensual satisfaction, and an apologia for it. On one hand, sensual satisfaction is obtained directly by abstraction, by confusing the abstract with the palpable, signals with symbols, and hoaxes with myths, in an impenetrable imbroglio. On the other hand, and paradoxically, boredom ‘creates’ itself directly by the pleasures of the eyes, the ears and the intellect. If there is any truth in such a way of ‘living’, it is that these intense and evanescent moments of sensual satisfaction no longer have much in common with pleasure. Pleasure and sensual satisfaction have parted company; they try to reunite, but in vain, like nature and culture, like artifice and reality. It seems that when sensual satisfaction is deliberately summoned, wanted, aroused, overaroused – sensations becoming abstract elements in the organization of an orgasm – it no longer touches the nerves and the brain. Just like the old theory, everything happens as if pleasure came as a kind of reward for an action intended for something else, the crowning moment of a spontaneity which did not have orgasm as its intended aim. Thus there is a certain ‘modernity’ in which everything happens as if the pure will to sensual satisfaction were a mere distraction, at one and the same time too frivolous and too serious. Diametrically opposed to these phenomena of decline, we see socialist life and art, stripped of all frivolity and aestheticism, offering neither pleasure nor sensual satisfaction; they want to be useful (politically), and they are monumentally boring, but no more so than the faked orgasms of life and art in the bourgeois camp.

As for Stendhal, he still believed in beauty, presence, ‘complete illusion’, generosity, pleasure and more-than-pleasure, ‘reality higher, existence more true than common existence’ (the phrase is Hegel’s). He believed in them as the classicists did, but he wanted to use non-classical methods to attain them. To find a definition of beauty,
evident yet hidden, present yet deep, inexhaustibly given, Stendhal still turned to Plato. But beauty was soon to expire, with Baudelaire reinventing it, sharpened to the point of death, in evil and ugliness, and Rimbaud officiating at the convulsions of its final demise. Something else would take its place. After Stendhal? No, while he was still alive, and even better: it was already there, in his own works. So what was it? Interest, the interesting. The interesting is not the same thing as beauty. It is a new ‘category’ alongside or beyond beauty, the sublime, and the charming, which does not appeal to the same people, nor to the same faculties. Perfect yet ephemeral, Stendhal’s novels succeed in being both beautiful and interesting, making beauty and the interesting complementary elements, fusing them almost. In Balzac’s novels, the interesting predominates. Balzac abandons beauty; his style is no longer right for it; he is interesting in the way he uses ordinary men, giving them animality rather than human refinement, and presenting them as ‘types’ comparable to biological species. By describing, understanding and explaining the creatures which Hegel had called ‘abstract animals’ he becomes something of a social physiologist, especially in the Foreword to his Human Comedy. And this sets a pattern which will become more and more prevalent across the whole range of narrative genres: psychological, historical, political and detective, etc. This is something which many an analyst and many a historian have found puzzling, because they have failed to perceive the transition from one aesthetic to another, from one category to another. We could therefore ask ourselves whether, in his struggle with romanticism against classicism, Stendhal did not end up capping his own well. But that is not the important question. Suffice it to note that pleasurable elements of interest are no longer defined by themselves, but by what is devoid of interest, that is, by their opposite. Unfortunately, interest is a short-lived phenomenon. It is quickly exhausted. The interesting becomes boring. As soon as it is no longer topical, as soon as the brief, orgasmic instant during which it disguises boredom is over, it too enters the realm of the boring, making way for boredom in all its unpasteurized purity. Something we found intensely interesting last year bores us today. It is finished, empty. Everything (no matter what: anecdotes, small news items, etc.) can become interesting. It is merely a question of getting the presentation right, meeting a few technical requirements: surprise, suspense. If there is anything more boring than an interesting thing which has ceased to be interesting, it is something which has not been successfully ‘put across’. This could be one of the dialectical movements within ‘modernity’, one of its concealed movements. If that is the case, it is impossible to return to Stendhal’s pleasure principle. What
point is there in turning to something which no longer has any meaning? . . .

Despite his disappointments, what a happy man! Stendhal's intuition and experience told him where to place his bets. He knew what the game was, what the stakes were, who was likely to win, and what the prize would be. And then, and most importantly of all, something great sustained him: not simply that he knew that he was a genius, and was proud of the fact, but something more. He had at least two supports, both very different: the Civil Code, and beauty. Thus he was able to express his opinions frankly, and succinctly. He had no time for dubitable, allusive phrases. He philosophized, even about things which philosophers would generally consider to be beyond their scope – love, pleasure – without affecting a philosophical tone, and without making philosophy his profession. He was not afraid of getting into arguments with people, as long as he could have his say. For him, writing was like smoking a cigar.

Follow in his footsteps? Imitate him? You must be joking! The pleasure principle is so ephemeral that nowadays this image – to write for the pleasure of it, like smoking a cigar, and not in order to impose one's ideas, or to earn money, or because writing is one's profession – has virtually lost all meaning.

(Just a minute, reader, if you don't mind – or even if you do – I shall take a moment more of your time to mull over the following little fact: Stendhal made no bones about writing things like: 'I believe I can conclude that . . . I admire many painters who . . . ', etc. In 1961, the person who wrote the lines I am about to quote doesn't know whether he's coming or going. 'I' no longer dare to write 'I'. I hide behind an anonymous 'we'. If I have the nerve to write 'I', someone will immediately shout: 'The self-centred little bourgeois! He seems to think his opinions are important. . . .' Someone else gravely exclaims: 'The self is detestable. . . .' And it's all too true. This is what a young man of twenty-five wrote to me in 1960, just a year ago:

We are profoundly convinced that the self and all its derisory liberties is a dead end. The old days of romanticism are long gone, and loneliness has lost its letters patent of nobility. Now it belongs in the gutter with Beckett's down-and-outs. What is to be done with this self? It has been described and overanalysed, left, right and centre. Either it is too empty, or too full. Could it be the end of the line for the individual? He looks at Giacometti's sculptures as they stand staring into the unknown, immobilized, their arms stuck to their sides, present and yet distant and inaccessible, and it is himself he sees.
On the other hand, if I write 'we', someone will immediately ask: ‘Who is “we”? The author? His friends? His contemporaries? Everyone?’ And that someone will be absolutely right. Everyone is right. Because look: it is a reign of terror, not only political terror, or several political terrorisms, but an intellectual one. Every group, every specialism has its terrorists who reign with admissible or inadmissible methods; and I who write have raised the banner of rebellion, throwing down the gauntlet to terrorism; and one day, perhaps, I will write a sociology of the mandarinate or a sociology of terror in the sciences, the arts and literature, and not simply in rhetoric, which Jean Paulhan examined so expertly in *Les fleurs de Tarbes*. Since that book was published in 1941, intellectual terrorism has become rife, with politics playing a major role in its dissemination. It is striking at the heart of things: language, emotions. It proceeds by a process of intimidation, moral coercion and prevention. It is so powerful and so insinuating that my speech is reduced to a stammer; I do not know how to express myself, I put on disguises, I wear masks, and in my abjection I envy Stendhal and his distant freedom. It never ceases to astonish me. For in 1825 (as in 1961) literary trifles stopped being literary trifles only when they started taking up Party matters. Stendhal tells us that all literature which does not address the transitory political issues of its day, with all their rough edges and agitations, can never be more than an entertainment. Party politics and positions save art and literature from ineptitude. Yet Party members, the politicians, are against ideas, and use terrorist methods to combat them. In philosophy, in music, in painting, the introduction of politics has the effect of a pistol shot in the middle of a concert. And what was true for Stendhal’s time is true for ours. A little politics makes philosophy, art and literature interesting. Too much politics kills them. Now it is a feature of politicians that they do not and cannot restrain themselves, for all they want is power. To put it another way: whatever arouses interest destroys interest, and when (political) interest is injected into philosophy, literature and art, it commits hara-kiri. So what are we to do? Paint these instruments as though they were ‘still lifes’? Describe the loathsome and impotent hatreds which impotent hatred draws in its wake? How could Stendhal acquiesce to the presence of political interest and at the same time maintain the pleasure principle, and the idea of art as an agreeable trifle? And beauty? And the complete illusion? Above all, how could he feel so much at ease and so free, writing as though he were smoking a cigar, and still come out with such serious ideas? There is something in all this which I am still unable to grasp. Could it be that terrorism has changed meaning? Could it have become so extreme that it has been internalized within the human
heart? How? Until when? Upon which, I close this long parenthesis.

Stendhal’s debate between the supporters of classicism and the supporters of romanticism gravitates around two precise notions: the notion of imitation and the notion of time. The classical tragedian wants to stay as close to reality as possible; he imitates it. In the words of the Academician in *Racine and Shakespeare*: ‘it is not credible that an action represented in two hours should encompass a week or a month, or that in a few moments the actors should go from Venice to Cyprus, as in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, or from Scotland to the English court, as in *Macbeth*.’

If our author is rigorous in his imitation of reality, then the action of his tragedy will last a minimum of two hours and a maximum of twenty-four, which is the margin of time laid down by the rules. But why twenty-four rather than two? Our classical gentleman knows how important these arguments are. He replies: ‘In the imitative arts, one must be strict, but not rigorous.’ But then he suggests that during the intervals the audience can suppose that a longer period of time is elapsing than that during which they are actually sitting watching the stage. Without knowing it, he has just opened the door to the imaginary. He is lost. Immediately the romantic (the voice of Stendhal) is able to reply that if the audience is involved in the action, it ‘gives no thought whatsoever to the time that has passed’. The spectator will not look at his watch. If he does, it means that he is bored. Time goes at a different pace on stage than in the auditorium. They are not the same times: one is ‘real’, the other is ‘fictitious’ or imaginary.

Thus Stendhal raised the problems of time, problems which generations of writers and novelists were to ponder obsessively until they finally exhausted them and laid them to rest in a bizarre mixture of technicity and ideologies. But there is more to be said. Stendhal understood that it was essential for romanticism that time should be fully restored. With this restitution, emotions, feelings and subjectivity would be reaffirmed, along with rhythm, body movements, the life of the flesh. Stendhal even understood the temporal duality between the imaginary (in fiction) and the real as experienced. The imagination does not move within the same time span as the ‘real’. Stendhal criticizes the way classicism confuses time and space on the pretext of observing the unities, and the consequent reduction of time to the criteria of space. Unity of place takes control, and movement is swallowed up. ‘In the space of a few moments . . . ’ is a typical classicist expression.

For the classicist, imitation has become a fetish. He is no longer able to understand time and movement, and all he imitates are things strung along in inert space. While others try to control space, poets – and musicians especially – project themselves
into the time created by their own words and songs. Novelists unfold their narrative for their readers in a similar fashion. Because of his musical background, Stendhal rejects an outdated aesthetic which is incapable of understanding what the work of art really is. He also rejects an ideology which other artists took seriously (while they never accepted it literally). He proposes a new aesthetic: beauty as pure creation. Art does not imitate. It creates. And it is the imagination which creates, using the ‘real’ as a raw material analogous to sounds and instruments in music, or to language and words. The latter are indispensable to the poet and, without poetry, are reduced to mere triviality. Art has never imitated. It has always created. But what has it created? To begin with, another time (or another space, rhythmic and measured), even when, in all modesty, the artist believed that he was imitating, and did not know that he was creating. But above all, art created the complete illusion, the ravishing presence, the beauty which keeps its promise of happiness.

(I open another parenthesis. One of the things which is least conducive to the bringing forth of moments of perfect illusion is admiration. Thank you, thank you, Henri Beyle, alias Stendhal, for explaining to me why I felt so awkward with so many contemporary works, so many well-written novels, lovely poems, amazing paintings, excellent theatre productions, superior techniques, so much cleverness and virtuosity. In a word: I admired them. My admiration for the author was like a wedge driven between me and the work, between me and the work as presence, and with that wedge came an alien presence: the author. And I could not understand why I should feel so reticent while at the same time I was so bowled over with admiration. There is something deep within the work of art, within beauty, which is impervious to men and their techniques. Yet the public demands them, it needs to see them. I searched for presence, and all I found was the presence of the artist or the author. Oh Louis Aragon! Oh François Mauriac! Oh Malraux! How admirable thou wert, how admirable thou art!)

With these very simple considerations Stendhal brought a period of aesthetics, and perhaps even of art, to an end. In his own way he discovered what Hegel had recently discovered in his, via Kant’s hesitant transition from natural beauty to created beauty. Art creates. What does it create? Beauty. But we must be wary. Does not beauty imply the idea that somehow or other there is a model of Beauty in the Divine Absolute or in nature which pre-exists the artist and the work? Can one maintain at one and the same time the idea of beauty – or of presence – and the idea of pure creativity, the idea of illusion and the idea of truth, the idea of completeness and the idea
of illusion? Despite its decline into classicism, did not imitation have a foundation, when the work and the artist reproduced the great images and symbols of the cosmos, or simply when this idea of imitation guided and authenticated the humble patience of the craftsman-artist and his sense of observation and workmanship when faced with the world of objects? What is created beauty, that is, beauty uncreated until the action of man the creator? Will not pure time become a void, and the complete illusion mere silence, pure absence? Will not just any old action be able to pass itself off as creative – for example, picking up an object from where it belongs and putting it somewhere else, or taking a pebble, a root, a triangle and a cube, and sticking them on a table or a piece of canvas? Will beauty survive? Will all creativity be admired and admirable, despite being made to stick out a mile, so to speak, before surprised but world-weary eyes? Will not the end of eternal Beauty spell the end for art? And what will happen when the artist becomes consciously, overconsciously aware that he is creating, that he is deliberately creating, that he is rivalling God in full knowledge that the gods are dead . . . ?

A century and a half later, we are beginning to feel the full weight of these questions, and to question ourselves about the answers, whereas Stendhal would not have been able to ask them.32

As we have already said, Stendhal's aestheticism and his theory of time and creation in the imaginary can be understood only by referring to his sources: painting, and, above all, music.

It is of little importance that Stendhal only really liked opera, and that he underestimated the importance of the German symphony (Beethoven), preferring Italian bel canto. No matter: he understood Mozart, and realized that if there were changes taking place, it was music which was spearheading and provoking them. Stendhal considered that in The Marriage of Figaro, Mozart transformed the spirit of Beaumarchais's original play, retaining only the situations; he even suggested that Mozart distorted it, making all the characters more serious and more impassioned. He sees Mozart's operas as a mixture of wit and melancholy. As for The Magic Flute, he insists that it must be seen in performance if it is to be understood, and that it demonstrates how Mozart's delirious imagination is in a kind of divine harmony with his musical genius. For Stendhal, Mozart alone understood the romantic imagination, and this is particularly apparent in Don Giovanni:33 For pure genius Mozart is comparable only with Raphael.34

But the French found it difficult to understand souls such as Mozart's: for the French have too much wit and not enough imagination. They were too aware of their own eighteenth century, of
people like Pigault-Lebrun and Sébastien Mercier.35 ‘It is not in nature, it lacks verisimilitude’, would be the dogmatic judgement of the French mind, distorted as it is by classicism and characterized by an extremely mean-spirited conception of nature. But in fact ‘it is you, the academician, who are unable to enjoy this pleasure, with its little dash of madness’.36

In the first of his Lettres sur Haydn (published in 1817 but dated 1807, allowing him to give precedence to Madame de Staël when he uses the word ‘romantic’) Stendhal undertakes a philosophical analysis (today we would call it sociological) of contemporary opera. He asks what poems would be ‘suitable for ushering inspiration, that resident madwoman, into the romantic realms which music brings to life before the eyes of those souls it has ravished’. He also attempts to explain why Vienna was so receptive to music and musicians. The Viennese lacked the brilliant wit which characterized the French salons before ‘that dreary revolution of ours’. Political oppression drove people towards more physical pleasures. Viennese women were attractive, beautiful, coquettish. ‘I do not know whether this explains the Viennese interest in social behaviour, which we find so boring, but nothing could have been more favourable for music.’

In the second letter, Stendhal sums up the history of the art of opera in his own characteristic way. He starts by exposing a misunderstanding which derives from Rousseau, and played an extremely important role in the controversies of the time. According to Jean-Jacques, art imitates nature; thus real music consists of song and melody. And harmony? An artificial product of civilization.

Stendhal imagines Rousseau’s annoyance at the objection that the theory of harmony is based upon the study of nature. Nature? That is not nature, it is only a manufactured object, a thing, a sonorous instrument fresh from the craftsman’s lathe. Nature is birds singing, the babble of a brook, the sound of rustic fiddles, feelings, words, cries, and silence too. Art in general can be defined as imitation. Music imitates nature, and by nature he means not the natural qualities of man-made musical instruments, which would be meaningless, but something which was there before we were, speaking, sighing, singing, or silent. Music can paint anything. ‘With an almost inconceivable deftness it seems to endow the ear with an eye, and the greatest marvel of this art which acts only through movement is that it can even conjure up the image of rest. Night, sleep, solitude and silence are among the many pictures which music paints.’37

Thus, whereas Rameau founded his theory of harmony upon nature,38 Jean-Jacques used it to mount a resolute campaign against harmony, thereby bringing into confrontation two different
interpretations of nature, two different ways of studying it, and two dif-
ferent ways of understanding the relation between nature and culture.
No one has ever formulated the thesis of art as imitation as vigorously
as Jean-Jacques. He took it ad absurdum, and, in so doing, destroyed it.
The vigour of the theory prefigures its demise. Logically, imper-
turbably, Rousseau rejects harmony as something which is not in
nature. Nature knows nothing about tuning an instrument; all it
knows are tunes. For Jean-Jacques, landscapes, the countryside and vil-
lages are melodious, not harmonious. Not until harmony triumphs will
the ‘harmonies of nature’ be discovered, but that very fact will render
the concept itself less clear. Jean-Jacques knows that harmony is cre-
ated. And that is why he opposes it, attributing it to civilization, and
thus to artifice and antiphysis. Today we would say: to culture.
Rousseau’s philosophy gives negative and critical implications to the
notion of nature. He uses it dialectically to attack existing society and
undermine its ideological justifications; this society believes it is nat-
ural, but it is entirely false and artificial. On the other hand, in
Rousseau’s aesthetic theories, this selfsame nature plays a more neg-
avative role. It drags art – and especially music – back into the past.
Rousseau the philosopher is in the vanguard, at the spearhead of the
struggle. Rousseau the aesthete and musician turns deliberately
back to the superannuated world of the village fiddler. And he estab-
lishes both attitudes by evoking the same idea, the idea of spontaneity.
Furthermore, we may notice nowadays that Rousseau was not short of
good arguments. The solution to the problems and contradictions of
his time were not self-evident. Rousseau sensed how necessary melody
and rhythm are to music, literary style and prose. He protested in
advance against the tyranny of harmonic combinations, against the
immobilized rationality and abstract technicity of chords (simultane-
ous sounds). At the same time, he was rejecting the demands of eighteenth-century art, and events were soon to confirm that he was
right in so doing.
There is a striking contradiction in Rousseau between sense and
sensibility, between the critical side of his philosophy and its dog-
matic pretensions. His heirs will have to resolve this contradiction, or
give up trying to do so. What is nature? Where is it to be found?
Stendhal has an answer: nature is pleasure. A simple answer, coherent,
practical, but not very moral or socially acceptable.
Stendhal quotes Jean-Jacques on music, and agrees with him that
no matter how beautiful a fugue may be, it can never be more than
the sterile masterpiece of a harmonist. (This idea equates counter-
point with harmony; Stendhal confuses them through lack of
knowledge, whereas Rousseau, better-informed, conflates them for
polemical reasons.) Stendhal follows Rousseau’s example in reviling Rameau and the entire sect of musicians who stopped giving pleasure the moment they started making music noisier. In his early essays he is forever cursing composers such as Beethoven, and even Mozart, for accumulating notes (harmonies), and for introducing bizarre modulations and transpositions. Through love of bel canto, Italian music and Jean-Jacques, Stendhal adopts a ‘reactionary’ position in music, and pronounces against musical romanticism. Upon which, in the very same essays, through inconsistency or by way of correction, and contradicting himself brazenly and without warning, our Stendhal relegates the times when music meant just a few monotonous airs on a G-string to an unlamented past. He cannot praise Haydn highly enough for inventing the symphony by bringing together the science of harmony with the inventiveness which comes from the heart. What, in Stendhal’s view, had Haydn done? He had stopped imitating, he had begun to create; after thinking, feeling, loving, dreaming, the composer succeeds in expressing what he has experienced by means of unexpected sonorities.

What can we conclude from this? The following. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a mature and sensitive man – Stendhal – finds himself caught up in a network of problems and contradictions concerning art and pleasure: official classicism and burgeoning romanticism, French traditions and foreign influences, reality and imagination, nature and fiction, good sense and unbridled passion. In the domain of art, uncertainties become crystallized around a precise centre. They become thematized: melody versus harmony, art as imitation versus art as creation. Stendhal could pronounce on the matter only after a long process of maturation; he was hesitant; he got somewhat confused, unable as he was to separate himself from the ideas of Rousseau until such time as he could discover his own theoretical and practical principle, the egotistical principle of maximum pleasure. Then he took a decision which committed him – very early on – in the new direction, romanticism, in the name of the new art, harmonic music.

We could take this analysis much further – but where is it leading? To a proposition and a theory. In the eighteenth century (particularly in the second half) and in the nineteenth century (but especially in the first half) there was one avant-garde art, the driving force behind the other arts: music. It was an art which was to undergo profound changes. The conditions and circumstances of this transformation were manifold: technical inventions (the harpsichord, the pianoforte, equal-tempered tuning), scientific discoveries (the study of resonances and harmonics), social developments (changes in the
composition of the public and its taste), even movements in politics (the revolutionary crisis in France and in Europe). The debates this transformation provoked centred on philosophical concepts (the concept of nature, for example) and lasted for more than a century, often erupting in fierce quarrels, with significant repercussions. Music gives a far-reaching impetus to the other arts, to thought and to science, to life and manners and love and ways of living: harmony becomes the universal goal, everyone's desire, everyone's ideal way of life.

In 1960 music is still too frequently treated as a specialized area isolated in its own special ghetto. Its interrelationship with other areas is disregarded. The fact that philosophy and art have always had complex relations with music (and that in any case, if specialized areas do exist, they can never be isolated!) is forgotten. This isolation has not been without its consequences. Many people talk about harmony without knowing what they are talking about, without defining the contours and content of the concept. There is every reason to believe that the initial and fundamental discovery which nourished an entire century of art and creativity (and produced the idea of art as creativity) was the discovery of musical harmony. But let us be quite clear. It is no longer a question of visual harmony, the spatial and numerical harmony of visible proportions. Taken from Greek music and fully taken on board by the plastic arts – painting and, above all, architecture – this idea dies away with the advent of classicism. For the eighteenth century, harmony meant the creative science and technique of new chords (simultaneous sounds on a vertical and discontinuous level, separated out within the sound continuum). We will go so far as to say that this creativity produced an upheaval which spread from music into poetry, painting, and finally – in France, and thanks to Stendhal – into literature and ways of living. It was a tidal wave which became swollen with the ideological flotsam and jetsam it swept up in its path, and before finally dying away it had changed the way the world was perceived, and even ways of loving and of satisfying the senses.

It is not our intention here to demonstrate this in detail, or to back it up with a wide range of texts. Instead we will concentrate on the following question: what impetus could create a comparable tidal wave capable of sweeping through aesthetics (leaving the social and political domains to one side) in the second half of what we conventionally call the twentieth century? What art, what form of thinking could assume the function of an avant-garde or a 'homing device'? Philosophy? Hardly, for philosophy has already self-destructed. Literature? It is riven with insecurity and illusory convictions. Music? But what kind of music? Atonal? Concrete? Electronic? It would appear that modern music has still to find its direction; it can no
longer claim to have the leading role of ‘pilot art’ it enjoyed in the old romantic era. Unless, one day soon, composers manage to pull something unexpected out of the hat . . . Painting? Poetry? The question mark remains. Cinema, maybe? . . . But is cinema more advanced than literature, or is it lagging behind? It certainly makes every effort to ape the novel, and the novel itself is going through a crisis, with a confused and second-rate mixture of reportage, autobiography, journalism and clever-clever techniques. Another hypothesis: if they can be rescued from the prejudices of neoclassicists and functionalists, why not architecture and town planning?

To summarize all these propositions: in 1852 Stendhal thought and acted as a star witness, an irreplaceable mediator. He recognized the upheaval produced by music and musical theory. He introduced it into literature – or rather, he proclaimed its influence. He adopted this line in the conception of his own novels. If art is effective per se, then even the most egotistical of artists has a generosity which goes beyond egoism. Art and artists – and this includes writers – bring something splendid to social life and praxis. Social life and praxis make this possible, but they cannot achieve it single-handed. Art intensifies life and life’s pleasures to the highest degree. It has no ‘elements’ – no raw materials – other than this life of society. It transforms them, because it introduces passion, imagination, fiction and dream. Thus poets and boring old windbags use the same language. Thus, and above all, harmony uses basic sounds to create surprising combinations and timbres; a chord is something other than just the sum of its formants. Harmony creates a world, an unheard-of world. Stendhal thought that art would achieve harmony in all its domains, multiplying and intensifying feelings, merging the unheard-of with the real, madness with reason, the fictional with the palpable and the possible with the impossible; he thought that art would become a single chord, and that all its dissonances would be resolved. The work of art? A festival, a marriage with beauty; its creativeness is comparable only with passionate love.

In our view, when he introduced music into literature as part of a plan of campaign for romanticism, Stendhal produced a fundamental project, but the thoughts he developed in *Racine and Shakespeare* have even wider implications, particularly for literature per se. In our opinion he made an important contribution to the formulation and clarification of the concept of literature at the very moment when it was confirming itself as a specific activity – when, more generally, thought was adopting specific characteristics, when intellectual work was becoming increasingly recognized as a highly specialized yet unfragmented activity; and when ‘intellectuals’ were at last beginning to
discover a relatively homogeneous group identity. This was the moment when writing was becoming a profession, and the writer—the man of letters—was becoming individualized, but within the context of a particular group or number of groups (including his potential readers) who intervened between him and society. Thus while his 'content' remained more or less actively prescribed by the social totality, his 'style' and his 'form' were no longer imposed upon him or suggested by society as a whole, as was the case in the seventeenth century. Individualized to the point of egocentricity, the writer had never been more in need of a 'style', and society was no longer providing it. The age of imitation was over. The realization that it was necessary to find a specific style confronted the writer with new and contradictory risks. This need to find a style coincided with a mistrust of existing styles—classicism, the new romanticism (and above all the 'artistic' style). It was becoming necessary to make art both a trade and a way of communicating, to find a goal for art in love, in social or political life, but without compromising it as the supreme creative activity, to propose rather than imitate, to invent and yet to be analytical, etc. Thus art became simultaneously a way of living, a way of saying, a way of making, and both life and the work of art were revealed through style (to put it another way: the work of art and the lifestyle, the artist and his will to create, formed a whole which had to have a certain coherence). The problem of the work of art, and the problem of lifestyle, of the will to create and of the 'situation' of the work as object and product, were both posed simultaneously. They were two inseparable yet distinct aspects of the same problem. For Stendhal there was only one answer, one possible solution: the pleasure principle in all its breadth and depth, uniting usefulness with dreams and physicality with fiction.

Since Stendhal, the concepts of literature and art have been the object of much soul-searching and much researching. Certain doctrinaires have retained only partial aspects or elements of the wider—and more confused—determinants to be found in his thought. Art, so they say, always has a use, so therefore it must be consciously useful; only parti pris and Party stance give it its true importance and interest. Literature and art must make themselves politically and socially useful; they must serve a purpose (the working-class party's struggle for power, and the making of socialism). They must reflect the transition away from the established order to political possibilities. They must subordinate themselves to (practical) action. Therefore the artist and the writer must accept Party discipline and obey orders, accepting the need for propaganda and for ideological orientation, etc. And this applies particularly to leading artists and writers, since they are more sensible and better-informed than anyone else.
These determinants of socialist realism are perfectly clear and coherent (rather too much so: too logical). Therefore they constitute a ‘structure’ and a possible option. They commit those who adopt them to certain cultural tactics and strategies. For this reason, one is free to accept or reject them. It is even to be hoped that some writers and artists, or simply ‘men of culture’, do accept them. If not, there will be some gaps in culture’s list of contents; a colour will be missing from the spectrum. But (and there are several ‘buts’) these determinants correspond to the most basic elements of a wider vision, Stendhal’s vision, which was that art and literature could and should be of service to the youth of France, to the French nation as a whole, and to the revolutionary cause. He did not use these basic elements to construct a criterion, a definition, or a fixed method. Rather, he integrated them with other, higher elements which would subordinate them and give them direction: taste, beauty, pleasure. As he understood it, the one did not rule out another, and in the event of it doing so, then beauty should be preferred to being of use and service. As far as the socialist-realist method is concerned, the main ‘but’ is that it changes – or runs the risk of changing – the partial into the total, the basic into the absolute, and means into ends. A further inconvenience in this aesthetic method is probably part and parcel of this first ‘but’: in practice, as soon as the interest aroused by the ‘content’ of these basic determinants has been exhausted, they become boring. It is strange how short-lived this interest is. It vanishes along with the politics of the day, just as the interest aroused by ‘bourgeois’ constructs disappears with changing fashions. To this, sectarians will reply: ‘Doesn’t matter. Those books or pictures or symphonies will have served their purpose. The Party will have directed the construction of socialism, or the struggle against imperialism. . . .’ And so there is nothing left to discuss. In this dialogue of the deaf, there is no agreement about praxis and no agreement about theory. One side talks about art (by which it means not necessarily just art for art’s sake, but also beauty, which it believes in, or pretends to believe in, or no longer believes in, without really worrying too much about it) – and the other side talks about something else: polemics, ideological struggle, political directives.

Why choose? Why should I be forced to choose? In Stendhal’s vision – and this is what gives it its value – choice is absurd and monstrous; it results in mutilation and one-sidedness. To choose, to want art as service and not art as beauty – that is, if beauty and art still mean anything – is to prefer the part to the whole. It is like defining love as reproduction. Why renounce pleasure? Why turn into a moralizer, a puritan, an ascetic, on the pretext of being of service? If people want
to be of service, then let them be of service - to youth, or the women's movement, or the intelligentsia (who need help often enough). Or, if the fancy takes them, let them be of service to the working class, the Revolution and the Party! If they could be a little less obvious, less noisy and less relentless in their attempt to be useful, perhaps they might manage to be more helpful! So who was it exactly who pronounced that pleasure should be excluded, and by what right was the pronouncement made? Who thought themselves authorized to change revolutionary romanticism into moralizing neoclassicism? We know who.

Some will say: 'It's all in Lenin!' To begin with, this is the argument used by those in power, and nobody is convinced by it any more. Secondly, excluding a few texts dating from quite specific periods, is it really what Lenin thought?

Chaotic upheavals, feverish quests, all that is inevitable. The revolution is liberating all the forces which yesterday were buried underground, pushing them to the surface of life. . . . It is evident that creative life demands wastage in nature just as it does in society. . . . It is absolutely vital to assure as much freedom as possible for initiative and for individual inclinations, as well as freedom of thought and imagination. . . .

Who wrote these lines? A modern Stendhalian? Wrong. It was Lenin.39

Let us admit that in certain circumstances (during the war, and even there, can we be sure?) it was difficult to sustain this Leninist romanticism. That much we can grant to Stalin's ghost and Zhdanov's shade. But is that a reason for abolishing it, this romanticism which held that revolution could not be separated from the full development of life's potential?

While socialist realism was narrowing its perspectives in this way, along with its ideology and ontology (not without compromises and opportunities, but carefully measured out, controlled and permitted to some persona grata or another), the 'bourgeois' side went on elaborating its theories. Thoughts about the concepts of literature and art followed their own anarchic path (isn't chaos better than nothing at all?). Let us quote the following résumé from that consummate connoisseur, Jean Duvignaud:

For Sartre, literature explores a fundamental existential situation, and just as soon loses itself in considerations about its own means; it then takes shelter behind an image of man which protects it from the terrifying problem of being without knowing why, and is doomed to bad faith. For Artaud, literature corresponds to a 'grace' which does not come to him as
a religious revelation, but as the unformulated harmony between the
problems life poses, the world, and the effort of writing. For Blanchot, the
novelist and the writer are trying to capture the elusive essence of an art
which surrenders itself only to be lost once more in an infinite circular
movement, where death merges with writing as nothingness merges with
being.

Let us compare these three recent definitions with Stendhal’s deter-
minants. Is it not striking that the latter are no longer present?
Pleasure, taste, beauty, utility, passion and the intensification of life –
in other words, both functionality and enjoyment – have all been
completely eliminated.

Stendhal did not set himself the ‘terrifying problem’ of being, with
all its whys and wherefores. He lived to extract the maximum sensual
enjoyment out of life, from its extremes of action and of passion,
even from melancholy. He had little time for ontology or being.
Undoubtedly, he knew the difficulties of good faith and the price it
exacted. His guide was the natural (not nature, not culture, but some-
thing in between – not a good conscience, nor bad faith, but
something beyond them). Although his thought was lucid enough to
be categorized as philosophical, he believed that philosophy had run
out of things to say as early as the eighteenth century; his quest for
style and for happiness was not overburdened with conceptual bag-
gage. Was he never anxious or afraid? No. What he never experienced
was the vague and generalized anguish of having to exist without
knowing the reason why. For him, life had no meaning beyond the act
of living. The meaning of life was to extract the maximum sensual
enjoyment from it. The pleasure principle contained this ‘meaning’,
this orientation. However, it would be impossible to pass Stendhal
off as a robust and trivial champion of reality: in The Charterhouse of
Parma, the dreams Fabrice dreamed in the church tower in Grianta
were Stendhal’s own dreams. He was a social man and a society man,
a man who communicated, who communicated his own self; and if he
sometimes found it difficult to harmonize this with his egoism and
quest for quality, the latter were characteristics he never abandoned.
It was simply a question of balancing the one against the other. He was
not one to be unduly worried or remorseful about not being God. His
works would certainly be one of the last places Catholic literary critics
(so eminently represented by François Mauriac) could possibly dis-
cover the quest for God, nostalgia for the divine, or even metaphysical
profundity and a search for ‘the meaning of life’. For Stendhal, God
was dead, and that was that; he was all the more able to understand
Christian art and religious passions. Had anyone told him that he
was exploring an existential situation (for example, the ambiguity between dreaming and waking, between fiction and reality, between madness and reason, between nature and culture, etc.), he would have been most surprised. For Stendhal it was second nature to act rationally and yet occasionally to surrender himself to madness, to dreams, to desire. And it would have surprised him just as much had anyone explained to him that dreaming and writing novels were his way of disalienating himself from life’s alienations – the stupidities, the mistakes, the failures – and that life was his way of disalienating himself from the alienations of fiction. And ‘grace’? If our analysis is correct, grace came to him from an obscure and powerful notion of musical harmony, a consonance between life and life’s ‘otherness’ – the unreal, fiction, dreams – which was created from within rather than imposed from beyond, ever possible but never attained. As for art having an essence which vanishes at the very moment it is captured, this is an idea of such pure abstraction that it would surely be simultaneously accepted and rejected by any intelligence acute enough to formulate it. . . .

Thus nothing appears to be left of Stendhal’s proposals, neither the basest (utility) nor the loftiest (beauty). Should we deduce that modern definitions have lost the essentials, and that the essay on Racine and Shakespeare is richer and more concrete than more recent subtleties, which have been rarefied to the point of conceptual evanescence? Are we proposing a return to Stendhal, just as in philosophy we might propose a return to Kant, Hegel, or Marx?

No. That is impossible. Everything which has disappeared is dead. If the pleasure principle, if beauty and even utility and being of service, have fallen by the wayside, there must be a reason why. What is it?

When the concept of a reality reaches the degree of perfection and refinement which the concepts of literature, of writing, of signs and signification have reached nowadays, is it a very good sign? The history of ideas and of philosophy seems to indicate that such a degree of perfection denotes a double movement: exhaustion, and supersession (or rather, supersession at the price of a profound crisis and an exhaustion which is at least temporary). Once the reality under examination is fenced in by its own concept, shaped by it and divided up into its various component parts, it has already been superseded. While the mind which compiles the inventory sits gloat ing over all the treasures it has accumulated, the mind which can envisage supersession knows that these treasures will slip through the fingers of whosoever should attempt to hold on to them. At the same time, this reality has not been truly superseded. Is it the fact that consciousness lags behind praxis, and thought behind life? Yes and no. Hegel's
theory of the backwardness of consciousness compared with essential and substantial movement must not be taken too strictly and literally. It is rather that the situation we have described is symptomatic of a backwardness in relation to what is possible. Thought which overtakes accomplished reality is always somewhere else; thought which takes stock of what has been accomplished finds it easy to grasp and record the real, and this facility often leads to self-delusion. But what becomes of the real once it has been defined? It has become finite, therefore exhausted. Who can guarantee that art has a future? Is not art disappearing to make way for technicity? Is not the artist's technique, his way of making things, his craft or his manner, already what is interesting about works of art? To contemplate them is to deconstruct them and then put them back together again, recomposing them in the vain hope of re-producing them. Art criticism and literary criticism are turning into arts and crafts which run in tandem with art per se, and criticism is being increasingly defined as a technical commentary on works of art. It is forming a language (or jargon) of its own which is determined by the (supposed) operations of the 'creators'. It deconstructs and reconstructs technical products. The genuinely critical element is becoming blurred and displaced by a perpetual commentary on making, or on the passage from saying to making in art. This language is spreading among the general public, which is adopting it as a technical register for discussing the making and remaking of works of art. Such discussions imply an externalized perspective, but always involve a great deal of interest. This interest is deceptive. Once something has been genuinely created, no one can remake it or reconstruct what it is in itself: namely, a work of art, not a thing or a product.

What will become of art if aesthetic activity is not totally absorbed by technicity? Will it be replaced by unforeseen inventions? Certain daring minds predict that the art of building new towns, and above all the art of living in them, will create styles, situations, active participations, games and pleasures which will have nothing in common – except perhaps vocabulary – with what we still call 'art'. We will return to this perspective – or rather, to this active utopianism – later in this Prelude....

Marx never thought that economic growth would necessarily entail a higher form of art. Marxist ideologues have decreed that the improvement of the average level of culture, creative capacity, aesthetic and moral superiority, economic accumulation and socialism are all synonymous. Conversely, Marx placed Greek art above all subsequent forms and spoke of its freshness, its eternal charm, its value as a model, qualities he linked to the 'beautiful infancy' of mankind in Greece.
One could go so far as to maintain that with socialism the destiny of art is being accomplished. The process of economic accumulation is accelerating. Despite all the dogmatic decrees, the non-cumulative sector to which art belongs is in decline. Everything is consumed – and the satirist in us is using the deadly word in its brutal, material sense. Everything has already been devoured, or is about to be so. In the way it is using and abusing art and traditional art forms as ideological and political instruments, socialism is in danger of killing them off. From this point of view socialism would mark the end of art, or at least of those art forms which first found their highest expression in Greece, and then later, during the periods when two dominant classes, now rivals, now allies, fought to outdo each other in splendour and beauty; as you will all realize, we are talking of the urban bourgeoisie and the aristocracy in the Middle Ages. This brings us inevitably to the fact that the mutual challenge between East and West (between socialism and capitalism) concerns economic growth, the level of technicity or the average level of culture, and not art.

Thus art in the traditional sense is in danger of coming to an end at the very moment when experts are taking stock of its vast history, broadening its limits and gloating over the extent of their knowledge about it. They dream up the universal museum, the total library, the perfect audiotape collection and film theatre, gloomy ossuaries of art thrown open to the voracious and boundless curiosity of the public. There is an immense amount of information about art: the accumulation of knowledge about it goes on unabated. Art is in danger of finishing its days in a delirium of aesthetic saturation on the bourgeois side, and in an absence of aestheticism and a use of art as a politico-ideological instrument on the socialist side. If socialism is compromising art, and perhaps even killing it by recklessly politicizing it, capitalism and the bourgeoisie are killing it by considering it solely as a firmly ingrained need which can be enjoyed on a purely physical level and ruthlessly exploited (not to mention the thousands of other dirty little tricks which we could describe in detail, had we the time, by which art is being dispatched). Thus, the bourgeois, with their aestheticism, and the socialists – or ‘Communists’ – with their lack of it, are engineering the end of aesthetics, while at the same time professing their unbounded commitment to the cause of art.

Mass communications certainly raise the average level of culture, but we may ask ourselves whether they do not also voraciously consume the art of periods gone by, pillaging centuries of accumulated riches, wearing myths and symbols threadbare, to the bone, without stimulating in return a creative activity which could compare to this gigantic mass consumption. Who will replace what has been
devoured? If we study the mass media, we may observe some of the mechanisms of interest and the interesting. The instantaneous and the sensational have replaced the imaginary in the way men see themselves and events; audiovisual images are becoming more effective than words, and it has even been suggested that because of this, words are losing their value. Current events and historical anecdotes provoke an interest in external realities which makes the viewer project and derealize himself. To the nostalgia provoked by centres of interest far removed from everyday life is added the obsession with encyclopaedic knowledge and the impression that there is a gulf between knowing a great deal and knowing very little. It could be that mass civilization and quantitative culture place the chansonnier above the musician and the poet, the programme presenter above the philosopher, and the politician above the writer. And why not? But in the name of what? In the name of topicality, of 'presences' (ephemeral, and totally, completely, and utterly illusory) or of power. This dual phenomenon personalizes influences by depersonalizing groups and individuals. The content of the mass media is incredibly interesting, but it makes the future of art and its place in culture seem highly precarious, particularly as mass culture contains a strong element of cultural apathy and extreme passivity. It would be impossible to overestimate the significance of this widespread irruption of the interesting, its devastating effects as a practical and theoretical 'category', its new predominance (i.e. as 'the news'), and the categories which cannot be separated from it: the sensational, the important, the unusual, the amusing, the absorbing – and also saturation, and reactivation (or repetition) the moment saturation point is reached. And, last but not least, boredom. The interesting no longer has anything in common with the specifically aesthetic categories of traditional art. This is a fundamental thesis, an essential and pivotal theme for our analyses and for our statements about totality. Beauty is dying, it is dead, the interesting has killed it off. For aesthetics and the artist, the death of beauty corresponds to and is a response to the death of God in philosophy and for philosophers; it is just as serious. Perhaps we are already involved in something other than art; but what, and what is its name?

Certain people believe they can see a renewed beauty coming into being in technological objects. Yes, it is true to say that as objects, certain motorways, dams, or electronic machines are amazing, even beautiful. However, they are intended to be manufactured objects, not works of art. Their purpose is to control nature, not to bring beauty into the heart of nature, or beyond it. It is a question of technicity, not art. In a word, these technological objects are interesting.
As for the rejection of technicity, it has not yet earned its credentials. It is highly likely that it will prove to be a sterile and impotent gesture. Technicity is an essential characteristic of 'modernity'. How can we refuse it without implying that the crisis of modernity can be resolved only by a return to the past, which would be both impossible and inconceivable? We shall rediscover the notion of the work of art in place of and instead of the notion of the object, the product or the thing when the modern town or housing estate comes into its own – perhaps. To use technical jargon, we are talking about 'large urban complexes'. Towns have always been collective works of art. Can the new towns which are born of ugliness and boredom become works of art? Can the people who populate them, who live in them, who shape them according to their needs, also create them, or will that remain the prerogative of the small group which plans, builds and organizes them? Up until now, the answer has been no, and this failure is the crucial problem. (Is this not the problem of harmony again, but renewed in another context, the practical context of full and active participation in everyday life, and with a different meaning to the one it has in relation to art and aesthetics taken in isolation? . . .)

Stendhal predicted a romanticism, and when it came it was not what he had expected. He believed in beauty as the supreme form, authority and substance of expressivity. But as romanticism ran its course, so beauty changed, growing old and withering away, perhaps as a consequence of romanticism. Had not the world of expressivity reached the peak of its authenticity and its powers in the eighteenth century, with its great controversies and intellectual movements paving the road to Revolution, and with the invention of harmony, that creative source of art? Stendhal drew his lifeblood from these great movements; then romanticism pushed the desire for expressivity to the wilder shores of excess; romanticism squandered its resources – beauty, expressivity, harmony – in such a magnificent, orgiastic and frenzied way that its well of creativity must surely have started running dry. The death throes were magnificent, a beautiful swan song (to use the famous symbol), and Baudelaire and Rimbaud both officiated at the last rites. After exhausting beauty in ugliness (strange dialectic – dialectic of strangeness), poets had to admit that the idea of beauty had lost its savour. So they were free to like anything – bad paintings, inn signs, crude naivety. The world of expressivity was withering away, and subsequent poets had to use the exaggerations of symbolism and expressionism to revivify it. Did not these poets also help to accelerate its decline? And is not the vast, voracious maw of mass consumption now in the process of devouring what little remains?

To analyse this situation and then return to the problems we have
posed – art, beauty, romanticism – we will now introduce several abstract theoretical notions.

In our view, the ‘world of expressivity’ and the ‘world of signification’ do not coincide. Signification can be defined by one of its extreme examples: traffic lights – the sign at its most precise. The signification of traffic lights is perfectly static and homeostatic, defined and definitive, precise and imperative: the red light means ‘stop’, the green light means ‘go’. In this way signals group together and disjoin two possibilities: they forbid one, they permit the other. Signals condition and command behaviour; they constitute closed systems which accumulate without merging, and programme everyday life. They constitute a pole in what we will henceforth call the semantic field. This field is made up of objects, particularly utilitarian objects, or ‘goods’. Among objects, there are some which command behaviour and are similar to signals. These are technological objects. There are others which suggest emotions, desires, and images. The introduction of a specific piece of ‘goods’ modifies the system as a whole (an eminent example: the motorcar). At the other pole, the antithesis of the signalling pole, are symbols. They have characteristics which are very different from, and even antithetical to, those of signals. They do not remain external to the people they influence, nor to the affective content they circulate. Unlike signs, they are not arbitrary. When taken symbolically, circles, triangles and spirals differ from the mathematical signs which share their names and shapes. Hegel said that the lion and the fox become symbols only because they possess the qualities which they express as a meaning. Symbols are expressive rather than significant. They are rich in varied meaning, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory: a given monument may not only symbolize or express a historical period, but other things as well: the life of one or several superimposed groups who adopted a conception of the world, or perpetuate it into the present, the coming together of people who accept that conception, the rituals which unite them, etc. A monument such as Chartres Cathedral could serve as an example of this. Symbols do not command behaviour; inexhaustible and propositional, they suggest a way of living; they tower above us, vast, majestic, profound. At the same time, they involve problems. What are they saying? What do they expect of us?

In this polarized semantic field, between symbols and signals, images and signs per se circulate. The closer these signs get to signals, the more precise their signification becomes; mathematical signs (if we are going to use precise terminology, we must avoid talking about mathematical symbols) determine operations, just as signals determine behaviour. Their rigorous combinations exclude chance (at least for
the time being). As for linguistic signs, they are articulated according to semi-rigorous structures of inclusion, which leave room for the aleatory.

And as for images, they are close to symbols, and frequently derive from them. Symbols come from the shadowy depths of social life, from a lost past, from time gone by but never completely gone by or lost, since it retains symbolic power – that foremost of powers which maintains itself between memory and death – and since it connects with our immediate relation to the world, our surroundings and our selves. In this way the sun, trees, flowers, fruit, the mother and the father remain not as immutable but as relatively stable figures: symbols, affective nuclei. They are metaphors for the relations between man and nature: his own nature.41

Images invent and reinvent themselves. Everyone (every individual) re-creates them on his own account; they are part of an entity, or a function, or a definable faculty: imagination. Or again, of a ‘region’: the imaginary. Whether it be a function or a region, imagination has extremely important powers (whenever there is an individual who has imagination); it allows us to separate ourselves from the immediate (from ‘the lived’) without losing any of its intensity and without straying into abstraction, by intensifying ‘presence’, but at the same time prospecting the future, the distant, the inaccessible: the possible (and the impossible, including that supreme impossibility: the resurrection of what has been accomplished, absolute repetition, a future identical to the past). By exploring the possible and the impossible, imagination tries to resolve the contradictions of the real, but not in the manner of reflective thought, knowledge or action. Its wagers are still all placed on the palpable, on feelings and emotions, which it prolongs or revivifies. Therefore images are close to symbols, much more so than signs or signals. They extend the zone of influence of symbols in the semantic field. They generally demand a confrontation between what they do and do not say, between what they signify and what they contain, and this confrontation must be clarified.

Although it plays a role in the semantic field, imagination cannot be defined in terms of that field. Like symbols, it is not one of its active elements, in so far as it comes from elsewhere. It cannot be grasped synchronically (whereas signals are entirely synchronic). To illustrate what imagination is (the act of imagining) we need to travel back into history (the diachronic), just as we did for symbols.

When magical operations were repeated exactly – words, gestures, dances, mime, certain actions which were repeatable at will in a specific form of repetition which could be pushed to the point of delirium – they would induce strange states. They had an effectiveness
which was both illusory and real, and within a small group of initiates—a secret society, for example—they organized the repetition and the *resurrection* of what had already been accomplished. Such practices still go on. These operations made time reversible (in a semi-fictitious, semi-real way). They combated time, within time. They *conjured up* the dead, the absent, certain animals, certain heroes, friends, enemies. Thus magical actions determined an intense *participation* on the part of those ‘present’ in a vaster and more total reality, on the level of a lived fiction. Ritualized phrases and gestures changed the members of this community into a communion, and *identified* them with beings more powerful than themselves, or supposed to be so: animals, heroes, gods. They took desires, aspirations, compensations, terrors and hopes from beyond consciousness and unconsciousness (rendered indistinguishable) and projected them as accessible metaphors. Thus magic and magicians operated directly on emotions and feelings, transforming something secretly hidden within every consciousness, and incommunicable by any other means, into communication and communion. Obviously, in archaic magic the consciousnesses in question were not particularly individualized. In these magic rituals they found—and still find—an ‘alienation’ which tore them from themselves, but ‘disalienated’ them in relation to the unbearable realities of nature or society. Magic had—and still has—a social power, capable of ridding the group of the feelings of terror and powerlessness produced by nature and men; or, conversely, capable of provoking them. It made it possible—and still makes it possible—to transgress the narrow limits of an everyday life which in primitive societies as well as in ours (although in a different way) was a slave to a multitude of rules, the closely connected rules of propriety and routine.

These ‘categories’ of *magic*—repetition, resurrection, evocation, participation, projection—are also categories of *imagination* and the *image*. Because the categories of active magic helped to create and consolidate symbols, and because symbolisms have always been a part of magical operations, we can see how close magic is to the imaginary and the symbolic. Yet these similarities can conceal certain differences. Compared with magic, imagination shifts the relations between subject and object, transferring power from the subject on to other objects, a metamorphosis of meaning. In and by his imagination, it is the *individual* who supersedes the immediate and the lived; it is he who grants himself power to investigate possibilities and to revivify what has been accomplished. The individual uses his own raw materials (memories, language, accepted or enforced symbols) simultaneously to *do* and *say* for himself what had hitherto been
accomplished by a community (usually a small and unofficial one, led by a wise man or a wizard). This he does by means of real actions, such as dancing or trances. The semi-fictitious, semi-real effectiveness of imagination comes from the emotional content of the individual consciousness. Thus the subject of the above-mentioned actions gets smaller, while its object gets larger and more extensive. The meaning of images is amplified. They can even begin to explore the cosmos, create emotions, provoke actions, and can therefore result in the production of constructs.

Receiving their content from emotions and representations (knowledge), these categories have developed socially. In this way they have become and are becoming categories of aesthetics or art. They mediate between aesthetic activity and the raw materials used: emotions, knowledge, events, languages and signs, the immediate data of 'lived' experience.42

During the course of a complex dialectic – ‘alienation–disalienation’, ‘weakness–power’, ‘objectivity–subjectivity’ – man has changed his weakness in relation to nature into his own inner strength.

We lead our everyday lives in the total semantic field, which (if our description of it is accurate) is made up of an interconnecting network comprising closed systems of signals, more or less open systems of signs, symbols each with its own originality and influence (so that they cannot function together as a system), and finally, images, which, rather than constituting a system, have a concrete unity, the unity of the individual in his social life. Images become thematized in the reduced field (i.e. partial within the total field) of individual consciousness.

Thus we have defined the total semantic field as complex, differentiated, polarized, alive with the fluxes and tensions which come and go from one pole to the other. Language tries to equal this totality, but is never more than one of its parts. Thus while linguistics may provide a model semantic field, it could never define the total field. To the notion of a determined (structured) interaction of units, we will add the notion of a set of polarized systems which extends and modifies it without destroying it. In the area of signals, the semantic field becomes trivialized, repetitive and strictly operational. The other pole is dominated by the perpetual and sometimes distressing surprise provoked by the presence and intervention of symbols as aesthetic or affective events. The zone between these two poles is a mine of information – both surprising and trivial – provided by images and signs. Thus great dialectical movements operate within this total field. Contrary to the opinion of many theorists (semanticists, psychologists, sociologists, and even philosophers) who give ontological
priority to signs and signification (which results in an emphasis on structure rather than polarization), it does not seem possible either to merge or to separate expressivity and signification, nor to define the one by the other. The difference between them is none other than the difference between parole and langue in post-Saussurean structural linguistics. It is also the difference between an individual’s total being (reality, possibilities and impossibilities) and the gestures, mimics and borrowed stereotypes by which he speaks and signifies himself. We will throw this difference back in the face of the structuralism which fetishizes signification, signs, discourse, and thus the articulation of signs and its formal laws. Parole expresses, langue signifies; together they make up living communication, as mutual supports in a perpetual conflict. There can be no expressivity without signs, significations or even signals; their task is to turn expressivity into utterance (thus to grasp it in its totality and exhaust it). Equally, there can be no signification without the expressivity which gives it life, the expressivity which it translates into a conventional code, thereby immobilizing and trivializing it. Between these two terms we see a unity and a conflict. They cannot do without each other, they are locked in mutual combat. The result of this shifting, dialectical relation between the expressive and the signifying is meaning. Meaning supposes both aspects, both ‘formants’; it encompasses and supersedes them. Meaning is what is uttered and signified, and it is also what is suggested, indicated, but left unspoken. For expressivity has a zone of penumbra, of depth, of reticence – fastidiousness, almost – which borders on the unutterable, the silence which comes from above (or below . . . ).

It goes without saying that the semantic field thus defined does not cover the totality of social practice and empirical reality. Like language – which it incorporates – it represents only a single level of experience. More exactly, language is a level of practical experience more precise, more structured and more limited than the total semantic field, which can thus itself be defined as a wider level, incorporating language, within praxis. With its gaps and lacunae, its nuclei of affectivities and significations which act upon desires and actions, forming and deforming them, filtering the data of ‘lived’ experience, discourse enters into the semantic field, but only as one of its elements. If discourse has gaps and produces gaps in empirical living, the semantic field is wider, because of expressivity, symbols and images. Conversely, it also incorporates the triviality of behaviour patterns and the redundancy of signals. This does not mean that it can compensate for all the failings and blank spots in ordinary discourse. And if the man who speaks, who lives by speech and whom speech
conjures forth, finds in the semantic field a bulwark against banality, be it through rhetoric, philosophy or poetry, it is by no means certain that it will afford him complete self-realization.

The semantic field encompasses culture and social activities. Thus constructs and actions cannot be separated, nor can their possibilities ever be exhausted, if only because the semantic field itself retains links with nature. It is like a casino in which groups and individuals play serious or light-hearted games, the table where they demonstrate or dissimulate their various rules of play, their bids, their stakes, their tactics and strategies, their challenges and chances.

The semantic field is also the domain where each physiological or general human need follows its own individualized trajectory; these needs are transformed into desires, and to a greater or lesser degree become linked to images, symbols and 'values'. Then, on a higher plane, they become individual and social needs once more, known and recognized as such. These transformations always involve often very painful conflicts, and in them desires evolve in a process of mutual self-recognition – desire becoming the desire to be desired, for example – in which each desire is also confronted with the objective conditions for its self-realization (its full satisfaction). Knowledge and recognition operate almost exclusively in the semantic field, in a complex game of snakes and ladders. The totality of the field cannot fully compensate for the inadequacies of language, and these can become translated into failures, errors, deviations, artifices, as well as frustrations and deprivations.

We will now return to the problem of aesthetic communication, then to the problem of romanticism, and finally to the problem of the destiny of art. Every time we appear to stray from our path, we are a step nearer our destination. The further we proceed with our analysis and presentation, the clearer the theoretical link between these problems will become. So without further ado, let us indicate its most general aspect. To assert the durability and the renewal of art is the equivalent of asserting that no matter what their relation may be, the 'world of expressivity' and the 'world of signification' are inexhaustible. Symbols do not wither away; if they disappear, others come to replace them. Symbols and images never become signs, let alone signals. Signs and signals can never mutilate symbolisms. Signals will never replace symbols; systems of signals may accumulate and interconnect in a way which transforms social practice into a cybernetics programmed from above, just like economic planning, but symbols come from the beginnings of time, and although they are not immutable they constitute the slowest (and perhaps the deepest) current in the multiplicity of human time.
I hope the reader will excuse the appalling stodginess of our ‘concepts’ and the way we are putting them into words. What can I do about it? A century and a half has elapsed since Stendhal, that most social of men, talked about ‘discussion’ and ‘conversation’; by this he meant what we call ‘communication’, something about which we ask ourselves: is it possible, will it remain possible, and how, and why, and who with ...? Because of our jargon, what Stendhal called style is now known as ‘writing’, and what he called art has become ‘a cultural phenomenon’.

In the banal communication and trivial discourse of everyday life, only the region of signals and its borderland of signs are brought into play. Thus traffic lights, the Highway Code, its application and its consequences, the accidents which do or do not happen as a result, are in themselves sufficient to provide clichés for conversation to an enormous number of people on a virtually worldwide scale. If the motorcar has modified the entire ‘world of objects’, it has also modified the semantic field; it plays a key role in the trivialization of the ‘modern world’, something against which other aspects of modernity are reacting. Just listen to any ordinary conversation. People talk about the weather, children, illnesses, friends and neighbours, their car, cars in general, the social hierarchy, wages. The same words occur again and again. The only meaning is the trivial and almost always disappointed expectation of, and need for, an exchange. But now and then the quality of the conversation changes. It gets heated: now there are two people talking to each other, seriously; there are things at stake, challenges, confidence and mistrust. Misunderstandings arise and are resolved, words stop being just signals of communication and become signs again, more like images, sometimes symbols even: keywords, proverbs, metaphors, themes of the family, the father, the mother, dramatizing, folklore, even paradoxes and appeals to aestheticism.

Communication in depth implies the totality of the semantic field. The more it incorporates that totality, the more aesthetic it becomes. This communication is effected via several channels: explanation and presentation, analysis and deployment of the whole, description, everyday discourse, concepts as well as images, symbolic suggestions with their infinite ramifications. It implies the uttered and the unspoken in a subtle dialectic in which both are interdependent but, at the same time, in conflict. Is this communication produced (in jargon: mediated) by means of ‘structures’, the structures of language, conceptual thought and representations? Yes and no. Yes, because to be understood requires known structures shared by speaker and listener, writer and reader; and these defined ‘structures’ are as much related to logic,
grammar and word order as they are to the objects perceived and designated, their real connections and their abstract representations. And yet – no. What do 'structures' organize? Triviality. As far as non-trivial communication is concerned, all structures bring are the necessary but inadequate conditions for it to take place. Although we cannot do without it, rational coherent discourse falls as flat as a pancake aesthetically (poetically). It lacks informative surprise, and more: emotion, 'affect'. Writers, artists and actors who use only rational and common-sense discourse are like men with one arm, their right arm, and it points the way to neoclassicism. Stendhal would have wished them a touch of madness. 'Structures', coherent systems and rational discourse gravitate around the semantic pole of signals, those immutable beacons. But there is another pole which refutes these 'structures' and 'systems' in the name of the disquieting obscurity and mesmerizing intensity of symbols, and this pole exists too.

What if we were to add some subtle psychological analyses and descriptions dealing with individuality to this definition of discourse as something generalized? Generalizations and 'structures' do not include this individuality coefficient. Would its presence be enough to define a higher region of communication, understanding, or even communion between individuals? Although the question is a difficult one (it calls psychology into question, and notably the psychological novel), we are tempted to reply in the negative. Analysis does not have such powers, and nor do descriptions or psychology. In our view, communication between individuals would suppose something over and above individuality. Signs – words, to leave the symbolic dimension to one side for the moment – cannot do without bases and supports: living, biological relations, social relations, collectively understood objects, and finally, nuclei of affectivity, which are themselves linked to symbols.

As raw materials for discourse and communication, logic and psychological content are equally indispensable and equally inadequate. Some dialectical movements seem necessary, even if the heavily logical 'structures' of discursive language make it difficult to grasp what they are. Indeed, what are these movements? They are the movements between concept and image, between common sense (the region of established significations) and symbols (obscure expressions which suggest multiple meanings); between coherence and supracoherence, the movement of dreams plumbing the symbolic depths and revealing them to the light of day, transformed into the strange, unquiet clarity of fiction. Be they waking or sleeping, do not dreams perceive the hidden contradictions, the secret, shrouded conflicts, and wrench them from the shadows – sometimes joyfully, but...
more often painfully or in an ambiguous mixture of pain and joy, seeking to resolve them (in fiction or reality), or abandoning them unresolved to anguish?

Particularities are important. They are the intermediaries which unite the individual and the generic, the social and the personal. These particularities belong to groups and individuals within groups, and express themselves in *images*. And this is why images, like symbols, dreams and fictions, supersede palpable, immediate, apparent individuality and generalized realities, such as the structures of discourse and society.

To illustrate this, let us take an example from the theatre: the characters of the king and the knight. These are symbols, images, words which have passed from (historical) practical social reality into language and ordinary discourse, becoming clichés with well-defined significations as a result. At the same time, their images retain some kind of power in reserve; they are still full of untapped affective energy and undiscovered meanings. After so many centuries, they still contain something unknown which becomes gradually or suddenly revealed. They express something, but what? To utter it is to reveal it, and wrench it from the rich obscurity of symbolism; it is to make the image explicit; it is to transfer it to the realm of fixed significations, more signal than symbol. This is what magazines and newspapers do when they print stories about kings past or present.

In the theatre the king expresses power. This man is powerful, and power makes him important and frightening, capable of the best and the worst, and unpredictably so, for the king is free, terribly free. He possesses the dual freedom of rationality and whim. His behaviour does not follow the common logic of discourse or the trivial incoherence of ordinary men. He can give his passions free rein, and this gives him access to the pure and absolute passions which ordinary people are denied through poverty and powerlessness. Because of their power, kings and queens experience pure passions. By an essential reversal, they represent (they give presence to) the human being’s most common and generalized attributes: desire, love, suffering and the ability to cause suffering, to kill and to die. They turn the general traits of the human condition into a pure destiny, without history, above history, above anecdote. This pure destiny is in no way reduced or corrupted by trivial contingencies such as work, or the obscure ways men obtain control over nature. It embodies the power one man may wield over other men. This is why the kings of the theatre are understood (even in socialist countries). This symbolic content is superimposed with signs and attributes: the crown, the sceptre, the
throne, the colour purple. They determine royalty's hidden meaning; they localize, fix and suggest it.

Thus the kings and queens of the theatre talk and act, and at the same time they constitute a pure spectacle. To the living word which speaks, invents and expresses they can unite the gesture which acts, and the discourse which commands and signifies. They have at their disposal a vast, unfettered wealth of meanings: visual or poetic images, concepts, symbols.

For example, listen to Shakespeare:

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court.44

Do you understand what he is saying? If so, you are a romantic, like Shakespeare, like Stendhal, who would add, maliciously: 'But just listen to Racine's kings:

I've suffered all the ills I did to Troy;
Vanquished, in thrall, devoured by keen regrets,
Burned with more blazing fires than e'er I lit . . . 45

Do you understand? Can you still go on calling yourself a classicist? Do you see the difference between the king in what we call romantic theatre, and in French seventeenth-century classical theatre?'

As for the knight, he expresses adventure, a life which is uncertain because it contains the certainty of an ideal goal. As a being wholly committed to the principle he represents, the knight is a soul whose actions speak louder than his words. He tells of faith and honour, love and fidelity, heroism and devotion. This soul draws its strength from within itself, and yet it also becomes strong by subjecting another being: the chosen lady, the chief. Thus the knight is an ambiguous being, free to move within the limits of these ambiguities: half religious and half profane, determined by what is most internal and most external. Apart from the horse, his sign is the sword, guardian of right, protector of the weak against other acts of violence and other swords, but it too is capable of violence. Never coming down to earth, since he goes straight to his goal mounted on horseback, the knight leads a semi-ideal, semi-earthly existence. He demands confidence, but will not always fulfil its expectation; capable of sudden brutality, he is only too human and only too much of this earth. The vow exorcizes this duality. The vow makes the knight. Yet he who serves is precisely he who also betrays. He betrays an idea (faith, love, the
cause of the oppressed) because he has an idea and lives according to that idea. The faithful knight and the rogue knight go hand in hand. The vow can never exorcize the duality; the one will always accompany the other, invisible, a curse and a justification. Fidelity and treachery in the knight are as indivisible as power and death in the king. If the king symbolizes the absolute, the knight symbolizes relativity. He will be a metaphor for all those who live in ambiguous circumstances, but want to discover a direction and a representation of themselves. He will thus be the favourite figure of romanticism, of romantic idealism, of romantic utopianism.

Can anyone fail to understand the knight? Can anyone need explanations and dialectical jargon to comprehend his signs, his attributes, his secrets and his meaning – in a word, his dialectic? This dialectic runs through the entire history of chivalry (for which the knight became the symbol at a later date), then the novel of chivalry, culminating in Don Quixote, and it is still with us to this day. Accessible, fully developed and comprehensible, its meaning has become palpable, while still retaining its expressivity and signification.

Armed with these concepts, many of which come from the most ‘modern’ areas of knowledge – sciences which seem to have a genuine insight into ‘real’ experience – we will now return to the phenomenon of romanticism. First of all we will attempt to demonstrate that romanticism came into being at the same time as the total semantic field we have described (before that, this field had been much less open, with few signals and active symbolisms); secondly, that its contribution to the field was to clarify social symbolisms as well as to use discourse and vocabulary in a way which freed them from their previous constraints; thirdly, that it used symbolism until it was milked dry. Which explains the return to myths. But before we do all this we will make a final detour, and cast a quick glance at the theories which surround the phenomenon of ‘romanticism’.

Right from the start, these theories seem singularly contradictory. Some theorists attribute romanticism to the Promethean or Titanesque spirit of revolt; others to its diametrical antithesis, the will to power. In general these theories are based on ideology, anecdotal history and, frequently, rather suspect psychology, whereas our analysis and attempts to establish an overview use a historico-sociological method. One vague and vulgarized view is that romanticism could be defined as the individual’s rebellion against society, with romantic individualism exalting the ‘self’, passion, pride, lyricism – i.e. subjectivity – as opposed to socially and traditionally accepted objective norms. A more refined version of this theory would be that the great romantic movement, with all its shades of difference from country to
country and period to period, was generally characterized by a reaction against previous ideas, which in France were the ideas of the ancien régime and of the eighteenth century (despite a few obvious borrowings from the ‘pre-romanticism’ which was smouldering under the ashes of that century). What the romantics saw around them and within themselves was no longer a world governed by constants and explicable by encyclopaedic knowledge; in the name of their lived experience they rejected scientism and positivism, as well as the encyclopaedic mentality, but all they found in their place was a chaos of contradictory feelings in a society riven with upheavals, convulsions and irresolvable conflicts. This offered their extravagant subjectivities a total – or apparently total – adventure.

Let us accept this for the time being; but why does this individual suddenly begin looking within himself, preferring his own inner world to an outside world governed by science, and precisely at the historical moment when science was asserting its universal abilities? And what makes him rebel against ‘society’ in general at a time when in Europe the old traditional and patriarchal society so oppressive for the individual was in the process of collapse, and (bourgeois) democracy was moving towards the liberation of the individual? Why did not romanticism come out on the side of this bourgeois society against authoritarian hierarchies and the relics of feudal organization? And how can we explain the fact that in this revolt against ‘society’, pre-Revolutionary society, post-Revolutionary society, the old society and the new, are all lumped together? And again, in spite of all the great historical convulsions, the regime which followed the Revolution was by no means without ordered structures and internal laws. The Civil Code played a fairly important role in the thought of that time, even influencing literary and stylistic invention (in Stendhal and Balzac), so the thesis of ‘social chaos’ – so dear to the hearts of the most reactionary classicists, and particularly to the followers of Maurras – is clearly without historical foundation. Moreover, these ‘pure’ individuals in revolt against order at a time when order had been impudently overturned must have represented something over and above their own selves and their exaggerated sensibilities. Their feelings must have corresponded in some way or other to the feelings of thousands and thousands of other individuals, otherwise they would have had no audience, no influence, no success and no public. And that simple consideration takes us from an ideological theory to a historico-sociological study.

This same ideological theory puts forward formal arguments borrowed from the definition of literary genres, considered as an essential aspect of aesthetics. Classicism had established strict
‘structural’ distinctions between the genres which romanticism was eager to blur, merging tragedy and farce into drama, truth and dream into lyrical poetry, and poetry and prose into the prose-poem. The conclusion: romanticism is chaos pure and simple, disorder, confusion, excess. Drama, so characteristic of romanticism, was a mixture of everything: the physical and the moral, nature and culture, objective history and subjective passion. As Hugo wrote in the Preface to his play *Cromwell*: ‘Brought into play by this dual agency, men and events seem now farcical, now terrifying, and sometimes both terrifying and farcical at the same time.’\(^4\) From this hyperclassicist point of view, romanticism aims to achieve a confused and disorganized totality by mixing all the elements together, whereas classicism would use clear, analytically discernible and rationally organized elements in order to construct well-ordered totalities. Accordingly, this would suffice to account for the cult of passionate feelings and the importance placed upon inspiration and improvisation as opposed to analysis and construction.

A much more complex, more historical and less partisan answer to these arguments may be found in the theories of Hegel. The classical spirit had to give way; the imposition of an order borrowed from objective (external) reality upon the subjective and reflective spirit could not go on indefinitely. The subjective spirit had to liberate itself, to look within itself (albeit in vain) for the unity of the real and the true:

> By the elevation of this spirit to itself the spirit wins in itself its objectivity, which hitherto it had to seek in the external and sensuous character of existence, and in this unification with itself it senses and knows itself. This spiritual elevation is the fundamental principle of romantic art.\(^4\)

The spirit withdraws from the external world and into its own intimacy with itself. To attain its infinity, romanticism must lift itself out of purely formal and finite personality into the Absolute, but in a movement during which the Absolute becomes filled with what is purely substantial, and the human adapts itself to the principles of the Absolute in order to go beyond self. Thus the true content of romantic art is absolute inwardness; but it is not—or not yet—a question of pure, empty interiority. The *belle âme* marks the end of romanticism. Living romanticism reveals a totality: ‘The different moments which constitute the totality of this world view as the totality of truth itself now therefore find their appearance in man.’\(^5\) Compared with the gods of classicism, who were blind, or so far away that their eyes were not trained on the lives of men, the God of romanticism
'appears seeing'. Because subjectivity tends towards the Absolute, its reality manifests itself in objective moments of totality which are successively affirmed and negated: nature, the elements, light, history and its figures. By an inevitable inner reversal:

romantic art . . . is by no means averse to harbouring this real existence in its finite deficiency and determinacy. This means the disappearance of that ideal beauty which lifts the contemplation of the external away above time and the traces of evanescence in order to give to existence the bloom of beauty instead of its otherwise stunted appearance. 52

Thus, in its internal movement, romanticism contains the principle of its own destruction. In its attempt to innovate, to soar towards the Absolute, it revives the figures of medieval Christianity: chivalry, the Virgin Mary; in this way it manifests itself as a return to the religion, traditions, ideas, norms and symbols of the Middle Ages; religion, as the universal consciousness of the truth, constitutes the essential presupposition for romanticism. It soon becomes embroiled in fastidious descriptions of the real world, with its prosaic facts and happenings. But all that is affected by new and terrible factors: negation, darkness, night (which negates the light), the devil (who negates desire), despair (which negates joy), hate (which negates love), destruction, death. 'When subjectivity . . . is of infinite importance, then the negative implicit in death is a negation of this loftiness and importance itself and is therefore frightening.' 53 At the same time, from the romantic perspective, death has the significance of negativity: the liberation of the spirit, purification, the suppression of all that is without value. It is the negation of the negative. It negates itself. According to Hegel, the romantic would appear to be wishing for the supreme impossibility: the death of death.

By these specific traits romanticism announces and produces the disappearance of art: its negation. The artist's subjectivity is of higher importance than the work of art and its content. But this subjectivity leads to death and the fear of death. The ultimate meaning of romantic art is death, including the death of art. Introducing a new content into art which was vastly more extensive than anything it had contained heretofore, and subordinating this content to a necessity accepted by the romantics themselves, and to a self-proclaimed totality, romantic art finally branded its works inside and out with an 'accidental characteristic', a radical contingency. So circumstances and situations, the 'real' and the familiar, events and their ramifications and complications, all disguise a kind of freedom and independence in relation to a very determined necessity: the necessity
of aesthetics and art. Compared with art, the path they follow seems adventurous and disorganized. As a vision, a form and an order, romanticism negates itself. Thus, according to Hegel, when a form of culture places importance on death, it announces its own demise.

Before this destruction and self-destruction occur, romanticism elaborates certain forms to an intense degree: poetry, painting, music. The spirit seeks self-knowledge through intimate harmony with itself; this harmony is founded on the essence of the Absolute, and is achieved only in a spiritual development which – by imagination and emotion – raises itself above immediate finite existence.

In this relation, the inner, so pushed to the extreme, is an expression without any externality at all; it is invisible and is as it were a perception of itself alone, or a musical sound as such without objectivity and shape, or a hovering over the waters... Therefore if we sum up in one word this relation of content and form in romantic art wherever this relation is preserved in its special character, we may say that, precisely because the ever expanded universality and the restlessly active depths of the heart are the principle here, the keynote of romantic art is musical.

Linked to the narrowest kind of chauvinistic reverence for traditions, French hyperclassicism defined romanticism as pure and simple negativity, the taste for disorder, the rejection of traditions, and in particular of the Christian Graeco-Roman tradition. Hegel, on the other hand, defined it as the return to religion and a direct revival of the most authentic form of Christianity, medieval Christianity, bypassing the eras of classicism and humanism. For Hegel, this Christianity was not incompatible with neopagan aspirations; romanticism places the Virgin Mary and Niobe side by side. Let us accept that Hegel’s arguments are more appropriate to German romanticism than to the ideas and works of French romanticism from 1825 onwards, of which he had only a theoretical knowledge. The absence of religion and religiosity in Racine and Shakespeare is enough to demonstrate the limits of Hegel’s theories. But just because they are limited, they are not necessarily completely wrong. How to isolate the acceptable elements of Hegel’s vast speculative structure is an enormous problem which has never been satisfactorily resolved. A theory of this magnitude cannot be treated lightly, particularly as it is quite consonant with other known theories whose influence is incontrovertible. ‘The name romanticism has recently been introduced in Germany to designate poetry which originated in troubadour songs and which was born from chivalry and Christianity.’

Does this mean that the term ‘romanticism’ could be ambiguous,
without generality and historical meaning? Are the misunderstandings due to the use of the term itself? But before invalidating its use to connote common and differing elements in a whole, and the movement of ideas, works and manners in the first half of the nineteenth century, would it not be preferable to start our analysis and presentation again, using new concepts?

So there is no point in undertaking a critique of speculative Hegelianism yet again. There is even less point in scrutinizing Maurras's ideology, which is antiromantic by principle. Let us begin somewhere else.

Of all the many interconnected contradictions lived by the romantics, one in particular seems fundamental: the contradiction between the ideology of the bourgeoisie and its practical reality.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, throughout Western Europe, there was a clear and dramatic conflict between the ideology of the bourgeoisie (which was coming into power in England and gaining power in France by a supreme struggle), with its idealized slogans of universal reason, happiness, peace, equality and fraternity, and the social and economic reality which lay hidden beneath it.

It is because of this, and not because the revolutionaries perished, that the French Revolution failed. The revolutionary idea or ideal lived on, but had difficulty withstanding its inevitable confrontation with accomplished reality. That confrontation was a fruitful one, and while it was taking place the idea of revolution was to become transformed, transforming in the process the notion of what was possible and what was real. As Stendhal so clearly perceived, romanticism was both a post-revolutionary and a pre-revolutionary phenomenon – post-revolutionary because it was part of the great upheaval of 1789, emerging in the wake of its failures and defeats; pre-revolutionary because it was preparing the way for the revolutions to come – in 1830 in France, in 1848 throughout Europe – and the transition to the idea of socialism. It became the fundamental ground bass, serious, profound, untamed, above which the idea of revolution played out its harmonies and dissonances. In a general context, Polish romanticism underlined both the aspirations and the impotence of national revolution; English romanticism showed up the impotence of social revolution. Each country had its limited characteristics and its place in the overall context.

Thus the romantic movement differed from Sturm und Drang, and from the sentimentality and storm-torn aspirations of the previous century, yet it perpetuated them. The fact that the socialization of society (the increasing number of social relations) and individualism were developing side by side made the fundamental contradiction all the
more apparent and more internalized in ‘lived’ experience. With his self-consciousness enhanced by the ‘socialization of society’, the individual could summon up any enthusiasm for the ideology and the ideal which had paved the way for the bourgeois rise to power – in France – only by turning them back on to the bourgeoisie itself. In order to rebel against the bourgeois order, the individual would reject order in general; in order to reject bourgeois rationality, he would challenge reason in general.

Secondary but more immediately lived contradictions were superimposed upon this fundamental contradiction. This one, for example: bourgeois society stimulated artistic production, as it did all production. There was growth in the market. The enlightened bourgeois with aristocratic pretensions saw himself as something of a connoisseur and patron of fine arts, literature and the sciences. This helped to give him a clear conscience, that is to say, to make him conscious of not being bourgeois (at least as an individual). Yet bourgeois life was not compatible with art; it required paintings, novels, poetry, but only as long as their themes were not taken from bourgeois life, with all its comfort and stability. This meant that art, artists and the form and content of art would become marginalized and deviant. What would their subjects be? Rebellions, rebels, dropouts, the dregs of society, crimes and the ‘world of crime’, failures, the exceptional and the bizarre, the people and the rise of the barbarians – the proletarians – in great cities. For all its extrabourgeois or extrasocial themes, this art would still be the art of bourgeois society, the art which – despite the odd scandal or two, and a bit of censorship here and there – the bourgeoisie would tolerate and purchase, with a little frisson of fear. Therefore there was nothing to stop the artist from becoming critical and rebellious, except the fear of taking rebellion to its logical conclusion. Fortunately for romanticism, this led to a misunderstanding, of which it took full advantage. Everything was pointing the artist down the road towards revolt. Everything, including the search for themes, content and material which would please his public – perhaps. The artist would be given carte blanche in the name of freedom, and despite the fact that the bourgeoisie was inclined to dole out the freedom it professed ideologically in microscopic quantities. There was no experience the artist could not attempt, and nothing (or almost nothing) he could not say.

Rational in principle – that is to say, legitimized by reasoned and reasonable arguments – the romantic revolt sets the individual against ‘society in general’. For the private consciousness of that individual, this leads to a revolt against a historically determined society which has publicly pronounced the generality (the universality) of its ideas
and its goals, along with the coincidence between its ideal and the social nature of man. So the mediations between the individual and the universal – reason, morality, law, social practice itself – become blurred. They do not vanish completely, and now and then efforts are made to revive them. But they start crumbling. The individual rejects the authorities in society and replaces them with his own subjective consciousness, and this makes him feel in direct contact with higher, universal powers: humanity, the people, nation, God, nature, the world, infinity. What many critics and historians rather hastily call ‘revolt against society’, adopting the terminology of the romantics’ own subjective definition of themselves, is surely a protest against the absence of genuine society; it is an indirect, profound expression of a lack of direction and a rootlessness brought about by the lack of a natural social habitat and social base for the individual to appropriate his natural and social life. The individual withdraws – either into isolated groups and deviant ‘milieux’, or into himself. Immediately he begins confusing and equating the ideological, the affective, the ideal, the active, the universal and the subjective. He ‘subjectivizes’ the objective and ‘objectivizes’ the internal and the subjective, by projecting them towards the absolute. From this inevitably overvalued subjectivity, and under the gaze of each individual and everyone like him, romantic pathos is born, with its inextricable but powerfully expressive confusions. Slowly but surely it replaces the previous classical ethos which has become more or less degenerate, rationalized and bourgeois, constructed on the clear-cut distinctions of genre, subject and object, nature and the cultivation of the human ego.

One of the phenomena prefiguring romanticism was the importance assumed by youth, childhood and women. This is something our own era is able to examine and appreciate in its own terms. Another phenomenon was the importance they were given. To assume importance is not the same thing as being granted it. In fact the two aspects are as different as struggle and passivity, conquest and compromise, protest and indifference. The one means defiance, the other ignorant acquiescence, and the final result comes from a blend of the two. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, certain oppressed groups which have never been active before begin agitating and making claims, young people and women in particular. They begin to express themselves. They assume importance. So henceforth, people begin to take notice of them. Experienced or responsible people start ‘looking into’ the problems of femininity and juvenility. These cases and the problems they pose are upgraded: they become interesting. There are improvements in the education of the young. Very slowly, women begin to be granted advantages which will make them
beneficiaries of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, from which they had been legally, politically and socially excluded.

The groups in question need to express themselves. They are the subject of a literature which aims to increase their social status. And what galvanizes these new groups – young people, women, to whom we will add (without comment) the ‘intelligentsia’ and its subgroups, artists, writers, journalists and educators – is the right to self-expression claimed and endorsed by a society which sees itself as a network of groups. The actions and claims of these groups provide potential new material for individual representations of society. Moreover, certain people – those who are ‘looking into’ these new problems – actively make such representations more elaborate. What was to be the outcome of these multiple processes? A symbolism. This symbolism would afford a basis for individual representations of society, except for specialists in the Civil Code, or for anyone unable to see beyond the vulgar practices of everyday life. Symbols enable partial groups to be identified, and to a certain extent afford them a transparency in their own eyes and in the eyes of others within the social totality. These symbols are equivocal and ambiguous. They are manifest, yet they translate and express the secret aspirations of each group. They are what unites each group and differentiates it from all the others, yet for these others they are what signifies the existence and will of each partial group. Although they are new, they are transplanted on to old symbolisms, and even on to old myths circulated by religion or the art of the past. They come via society and history, and take their meaning only in and from the present; yet their source is even more distant and more profound: nature. But by a process of reversal, their social qualities are projected as natural qualities, and vice versa. These symbols have a dual meaning and a dual implication which allow them palpably to represent the men (and women) in question while also situating them, exaggerating their importance and depreciating it, championing them and putting them in their place – a limited place – in the ‘symbolic world’ as so defined. These symbolisms reveal a reality while disguising it. They are external to that reality, but play an active part within it. They point to problems and obscure their solutions, or the fact that no effective solutions are available. They are triumphalist and belittling. They are real; they are unreal. With the ambiguity of conflictual situations in periods without critique (when concepts tend to be too rationalized and logical to understand conflicts, particularly latent ones), these symbols are like a veneer concealing the underlying contradictions from view; at the same time, nothing can stop these contradictions from breaking out into the open.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, civilization
(whether bourgeois, capitalist or industrialized is of little matter here) moves towards comfort, the elimination of tragedy (in ideology if not in real life), and the absence of passions. In contrast to this bourgeois takeover, culture becomes supercharged with passionate values, violence, drama. Very much despite itself the bourgeoisie retains certain embarrassing representations of a ‘world’ it finds disturbing; but at the same time, although it finds this world unpalatable, it becomes preoccupied with it, and uses it as a safety valve for its worries and a diversion from its boredom. Symbols will show what this society is not and does not wish to be: what it is, in reverse. By what they say and what they do, symbols will give everyone their place in this reverse world, a mirror-image of the real world reflected in symbolism. It is a pantheon where the images of the knight and the prince, the delinquent and the seer, will all have their part to play. At the same time, these symbols foretell sudden reversals, revivals of vitality and spontaneity (which has been suppressed, but not eradicated), and the primacy of passion.

Seasons, elements, virtues and values become connotative of women and young people. Young girls are associated with springtime and an airy luminosity, innocence and unsullied whiteness, purity. The mature woman is summer and autumn, the good earth with its shading of forests, modesty, devotion, and also the passion which knows no bounds. Adolescents and young men are tempestuous weather, thunderstorms, fire, ardour. The cycles of nature and human life interfere and interconnect in a sovereign harmony, the total cosmic image.

In our interpretation and our point of view, it was at this point – with romanticism, with bourgeois society and in spite of bourgeois society, and at the time when society was following its contradictory path towards socialization – that the semantic field was constituted in all its range and diversity. It already existed, but narrowly circumscribed between myths and language. It lacked extremes, the polarities of signal and symbolism. Industry introduces signalization (things as signals for specific types of behaviour). As for symbolization, it comes into being – in our opinion – in the depths and substance of social practice as a whole. Art and literature are contributing factors; they do not create symbols, they embody them figuratively. They make them manifest, they give them life. Symbols and symbolic figures do not facilitate an understanding of contradictions (and the growing conflict between bourgeois artificiality and nature, between the cultural and the natural, between morality – or ideology – and life), nor do they offer a genuine solution; nevertheless, they bring a solution of sorts.
People use them as a guide to living, and with a certain degree of success. Symbols become figures, and the figures become models. Young girls (idle ones in particular) become pallid and languishing, at death’s door. The mature woman is pitiful and bruised by life. As for young men, their models are grand and theatrical, they ape their gestures, their clothes, their manners, their ubiquitous confrontational stance. On the fringes of the bourgeoisie – as a kind of antithesis to it – life becomes theatrical, an ideal stage, but at the same time a real one, where the bourgeois Philistine is a stock character, representing the platitudinous. As usual, vanity was no stranger to these excesses, in which Stendhal was unable to recognize any of the things he had expected. Romanticism had entered into lived experience, resolving (up to a point) the conflict between the stupidity of the Philistines (bourgeois ideology, the manners and usages of the bourgeoisie) and the aspiration to live life to the full, embodied in groups agitating for their rights. This romanticism gave currency and meaning to their acts of protest, but it also provided a means of rejecting the groups themselves.

Romantic symbolism was a social fact, a matter for sociology. It developed within social practice – without modifying it to any extent, but effective nevertheless. Works of art shared the symbols among themselves, perfecting them, giving them life. The individual was an active participant. Unlike externalized ideology, romanticism did not function as a spectacle. This was an era when any particular young man or woman could become Rolla, Graziella, Werther or Chatterton, and the option of suicide was not excluded. It was a very serious game. Fictional characters (from Julien Sorel to Fabrice, from Lorenzaccio to Rastignac, from Madame de Rénal to the melancholic heroine of Balzac’s *Le Lys dans la Vallée*) became approachable figures through symbolic mediations grafted on to old mythic traditions which were ‘modernized’ in the process. These figures helped to give the symbols reality, by contributing to their elaboration; they also facilitated their entry into ‘lived’ experience.

According to this interpretation, there was nothing antisocial about romanticism. The argument about revolt and the individual’s rejection of society is skin-deep; in no way does it penetrate beyond the surface of the romantic phenomenon to reveal the essentials within. From our point of view, romantic literature – and the romantic attitude even more so – was a reaction against the social insecurity of the individual who had rejected the dominant ideology, and of the vast but minority groups which had been marginalized, tyrannized and bullied as deviant. Vast groups: women, young people, artists, criminals. As for the proletariat, we will deal with that later. Romanticism
tried to resolve some of the contradictions of bourgeois society in an *idealized* way, with symbols and images, values and fictions, making them part of a totality—a representation of the cosmos. The romantics lived the need for a community and a communion *in a utopian way*. There was something religious, almost magic, about this way of living. Hence the fashion for religiosity and the magic arts (mesmerism, occultism, spiritualism).

Let us not forget that romanticism and utopian socialism were contemporaneous, and that they had many things in common, some manifest and others as yet unperceived. It would be wrong to isolate utopian socialism from the general movement of French and European culture, and to relegate it to the domain of ‘social questions’ and the socialist movement; equally, it would be wrong to envisage the socialist movement itself as a separate phenomenon.

Utopian socialism projected an image of what was possible upon the future, and the romantics wanted to live out that image. And that is what they tried to do. They confronted real, practical society with an ideal society of their own. They juxtaposed real bourgeois society, the society of contempt and separation, with a society based on community and communion. They laboured to create a vast secret society. In a project like this, there can be no shortage of farce; and what a field day for irony! How could a secret society be vast? How could a brotherhood involving aesthetic initiation—in literature and theatre especially—also be open, democratic and trumpeted from the rooftops in fanfares of fame and notoriety? No matter. Farce and irony were all part and parcel of the endeavour and the challenge.

This secret society was never codified, and yet it could not exist without a code.\(^6\) So it had one. It had its jargon, its passwords for initiates, its ways of friendship and making love, of seeing and being seen, its style of dress, its body language. Romantic theatricality was expressive, pregnant with hidden depths made manifest by gesture. Beards and waistcoats were signs; they announced that one was affiliated, that one belonged. To see these symbols and signs as merely expressing the tastes, fashions and excesses of the day is as witty as it is superficial. It would not be entirely wrong, since there was a romantic fashion, snobbish and dandified like the ‘lions’ and ‘lionesses’ who followed it, but as an interpretation it is still very restrictive. In any event, there was so much play-acting and role-playing, so many lives lived as though they were plays, so many would-be actors, that life itself must have been like one vast, extended theatre.

Thus romanticism brought together the most disparate of elements: women, young people, political rebels, exiles, intellectuals who dabbled in deviant experiments (eroticism, alcohol, hashish),
half-crazed debauchees, drunks, misfits, successful and abortive geniuses, _arrivistes_, Parisian dandies and provincial snobs. And so on and so forth.

They were all more or less passionately intent on living out the ideal solution to the problem posed by bourgeois society on a practical level, and on challenging its imperious ‘all or nothing’, that moral and social imperative which nevertheless excluded anything exceptional: art and its human raw material, art ever outlawed and always invoked. The romantic attempted to live outside bourgeois society, yet within it, at its very heart, in its kernel, like a maggot in a fruit, as though this society – contradictory, riven with antagonisms, newly formed and still developing – were weak, nothing but a pure and simple façade despite its pretensions to the contrary. And none but the most gifted of the romantics imagined that they were in danger of adapting to the Philistinism they hated so much, of exploiting and even outdoing it by dint of their own success. The romantics considered that the bourgeois Philistine with his filthy lucre, and the merchant lording it in triumph over aristocratic chivalry, amply justified their scorn for the social dimension. Spurred on by his contempt, the energetic individual becomes immured in an even greater contempt, with society his weapon and his battlefield. Bourgeois society becomes the world of contempt, the world of every man for himself. It is romanticism which accomplishes this transformation (among many other things), and confronts the bourgeois ‘world’ with its own image. It is the time of Julien Sorel and Rastignac, the former failing dramatically (because of his inherent purity), the latter achieving success.

This romantic individual was in the habit of saying that he was alone. Did he really believe that he was? Not always. Was not the loneliest – the _arriviste_ – the most socially active? The romantic thought he would find his requirements for happiness in his fellow­man (or fellow­woman: his soul mate). As an antidote to society, he would invoke friendship and love; he was constantly dependent on others rather than on himself, on well-determined groups, with roots in specific places: cafés, meeting-places, salons, circles, clubs. He led an intense and indefatigable social life. This solitary, isolated solipsist (self-styled or accepted as such, and acting out the role in all its theatricality) lived by connivance, complicity and meetings, all under the aegis of symbols and images. He was satisfied with the limited self-definition the signs of connivance and complicity afforded him. Because his deeper being was unknowable to himself and to others, he relied on symbols, on gods, on God, on devils and Titans, on the eternally virgin and the eternally feminine. This made him almost transparent, in his own eyes and in those of other people; and transparency was a
state to which his utopian way of life was eminently well suited. He was unsatisfied, complained about it, and his complaints gave him fulfillment. He communicated to himself and to others; he communed—rarely, perhaps, but always ecstatically. With what? Why, love, of course, dramatized and lived up to the hilt as an image of the Absolute. There were lots of tears. It was all very theatrical, but the tears were real enough, and they came by the bucketful.

At the same time, because the romantic was separated from anything natural remaining in the old society (ideas and standards linked to patriarchy, to agriculture and to the massive presence of a peasantry which represented an old cosmic order and a realist ontology), he sought contact and communion with nature. By a kind of spontaneous self-mystification he thought that through nature he could rediscover the primitive, natural nature which had been lost. It is an idea which needs to be emphasized: since Rousseau, the social and the ideological are no longer perceived as indispensable (necessary) mediations between the individual and the ‘world’. They are conceived, thought, criticized, and therefore eliminated, to make way for an ‘effect’, a pathos. Communion with distant history and nature appears as something both individualized and supra-individual. When it is individualized, it supersedes individuality. It is external and superior to social forms, even—and above all—to ordinary everyday language, which it reorganizes so as to make itself an object of communication and discourse. In itself, it is an enchantment, an ecstasy, something magical. Its place is beyond even images and symbols. To these it allots the mediating function which language, morality, ideas and their signs are no longer capable of fulfilling. The virgin, the mother, the Titansque and the demonic are merely intermediary stages on the way to this final transcendent yet achievable goal.

And here we are back with the central idea of harmony again, which, as Hegel said, is ‘founded on the essence of the absolute, and constitutes spiritual freedom and infinity’. There is a hidden but profound harmony between everything that lives below man (grass, plants, animals, rocks, sea, mountains) and everything living above him: his heart, his intuition, and the divine. It is a harmony which few are able to hear. It brings poets their measured excesses, their place in the cosmic hierarchy. It extends the poet’s ‘self’ in all directions, to the bounds of the universe, into the realm of the divine. This harmony is the idea and the soul of the world, immanent and transcendent, created and uncreated, but above all, creative. Listen to de Musset: ‘Harmony! Harmony! The language genius invented for love. . . .’ Listen to Hugo: ‘The wind is reading someone invisible a passage from the unheard-of poem of the Creation. . . .’
But of course, German romanticism was more closely linked to music than French romanticism was, so it is there we should look for the direct expression of harmony as the central romantic idea. And how curiously it is expressed in the Twelfth Vigil of *The Golden Pot*:

The lily is the knowledge of the holy harmony of all living things — *ist die Erkenntnis des heiligen Einklangs aller Wesen . . . Ist denn Seligkeit etwas anderes als das Leben in der Poesie, der sich der heilige Einklang aller Wesen als tiefer Geheimnis der Natur offenbart* — is . . . happiness anything other than life in poetry, where the holy harmony of all things is revealed as the deepest secret of nature?  

A century and a half later, one of the last romantics, Pasternak, would write: ‘We drag everyday life into prose for the sake of poetry. We draw prose into poetry for the sake of music.’ The idea has not changed. Whoever senses the immanence of harmony has no fear of chaos. To the ears of antipoets, harmony is ‘unheard-of’, not heard, not listened to, inaccessible. Doubtless harmony is also like the light – music made visible to the eyes of the spirit. It is more powerful than contradiction. It resolves contradictions like great chords returning from dissonance to the tonic key. Harmony relegates contradictions to the level of ephemeral appearances through which it passes and which it uses in order to assert itself. Once again we are in the presence of the divine Word beyond words which is uttered throughout eternity, Hegel’s singing principle, the symphony [*Einklang*], more chord than discourse. If this Word were mere discourse, it could never claim to seize the totality of experience and to pacify conflicts. Discourse and more than discourse, meaning and more than meaning, saying and doing and more than saying and doing, harmony resolves or absorbs dissonances, contradictions. It controls them and makes use of them. It is more coherent than the most perfect discourse, it has so much coherence that it surpasses reason itself. We may say that it totalizes the semantic field.

Whoever perceives harmony will no longer fear the confusion between subject and object, the merging with other beings. On the contrary. He will give himself wholeheartedly to this chaotic confusion, in the hope of finding himself, in the hope of regaining the many correspondences and dissonances between the senses, colours, perfumes, symbols and signs which Philistines find so disconcerting. It is an ordeal, but he emerges from it victorious. Rediscovered, harmony becomes intoxication, ecstasy, loss of consciousness in the Holy Trinity of uncreated–creator–created, a process closed to the profane and accessible only to the poet, the musician, the philosopher, a holy
trinity revealed outside the boundaries of religion: the Hegelian trinity. All ways and means of getting there are equally good: alcohol, opium, madness, fatigue, fever, neurosis, eroticism, tenderness, women or solitude. By traversing dissonance, the final resolution, by which the human becomes divine, is attained: harmony.

At the apex of romanticism stands a strange musical ontology. Could this ontology be the secret shared by some of the leading minds of the era, one of whom was Hegel? Before this argument can be tested, many concepts need to be clarified and many pseudo-notions need to be rejected. Technically and historically, musical harmony was a continuation of polyphony and counterpoint; more exactly, it developed and transformed them. Philosophically, harmony revived the old meanings of music: the secret and the revelation of the universe, at one and the same time natural, social, spiritual, cosmic and human. It took the traditions of Antiquity and turned them into a new metaphysics. The whole area is rife with confusions, and it is by no means certain that we can unravel them. Some people still understand harmony to mean spatial harmony, the harmony of symmetrical and numerical proportions. Or again, the word is still used to illustrate 'the music of the spheres', a spatial projection of musical harmony. For the romantics, harmony was something in absolute time, beyond space, where the divine song—the succession of chord upon chord—unfolds to reveal the cosmos, a time beyond the multiplicities of historical time. As for classicism, it saw harmony as order and the ideology of order, as coherence and the idea of coherence. In other words, it saw harmony as architectural. The idea that harmony was the creating of something never previously heard was invented in the eighteenth century and taken to extremes by romanticism, until it became a vision of the cosmos, a philosophy.

Of course, this musical ontology and its concomitant idea of absolute (unreal and surreal) harmony must be understood as the farthest point reached by romanticism, its logical conclusion. Soon this harmony which is and is not, which is both natural and supernatural, was to become incomprehensible, and not least because the very notion of harmony was about to explode. In the specific domain of music, the foundations of harmony became undermined by the fact of its own predominance, which had rapidly become tyrannical, and which resulted in the rebellion of its two vassals, melody and rhythm. The seeds of dissolution had been sown at the very outset of romanticism (by Beethoven in his late compositions), and now they were germinating. Increasingly, harmony was becoming a classicism, and by the beginning of the twentieth century its decline was fully apparent (the twelve-tone scale, atonality, serialism, then concrete music).
Outside the specific domain of music, the notion of harmony became bland and vulgarized, a means of disguising conflicts and contradictions. It became fashionable to try to ‘harmonize’ things – usually unsuccessfully, because contradictions are thick-skinned, and their bones are even thicker. Like beauty, harmony stopped being identified by what it was (and for the great philosophers, from Plato to Hegel and the romantic poets, was not harmony the ideas of beauty, goodness and truth rolled up into one single principle?). Like beauty, harmony exploded and died, sinking down into ordinary discourse. It became a vague means of arbitrating between rival interests, something vaguely coherent, ideally suited to a society built on class. The word harmony ends up designating a technical operation, a way of processing an object, or maybe the well-manufactured object itself. The development of a child, a champion athlete, an underdeveloped country, the medical profession, the relations between Church and state – these can all be more or less well ‘harmonized’. A chair is harmonious, and a landscape, and a holiday camp, and the leisure activities practised in it. Be they fruitful or destructive, contradictions are called ‘dys-harmonies’ or ‘dys-functions’. Now it has lost its aesthetic profundity and poetic extension, its philosophical powers and its illusions – now it has become ‘decent’ – harmony is reduced to the level of small-scale technicity, where it serves to justify some of the illusions of technicist practice. It has become positive, educational, informative – in a word, honourable and social. It now belongs to the trivial region of the semantic field. No one even understands what it means any more, and misunderstandings are rife about what it used to be and what it is now. Even in the realm of love, this degraded idea of harmony has turned full circle, just as Hegel had predicted; it stamps everything with finitude – interests, suffering, play, objects, things. Men manage to achieve ‘affirmative harmony’ with themselves, a positive unity from which the unlimited, infinite and negative side of harmony has disappeared. The obscure dialectic of satisfaction–dissatisfaction has replaced poetry, ecstasy, presence, or absence and desertion. Interests, satisfactions, and the peacefulness they afford, must not fall to the level of an ‘inessential existence’. Interests and satisfactions can be disjointed and antithetical. They are often duped and frustrated, and if they fail to constitute a unity once the world of desire has been fulfilled, they are nothing more than brutal and barbaric needs. After a series of accidents and contingencies, rationality changes into irrationality. Inferior satisfaction prevails. (Could these arguments furnish us with a criterion for discerning, in the withering of art and the death of harmony, the eventual variants of technological culture and industrial civilization? It is still too soon for this problem to be posed. . . .)
If there is a margin, a gap between the general contradictions and the overall movement we have just mapped out on the one hand, and the contradictions specific to each romantic – his individual biography – on the other, it is obviously by no means unbridgeable. From our point of view, the specific contradictions manifest themselves within the context of much vaster contradictions.

Let us examine a test case: Alfred de Musset. Perhaps his work lacks the range of Victor Hugo’s, but in the five or six years when he was at the height of his creative powers (1829–35) it condenses nearly every trait of French romanticism, embodying each one in a specific symbolic figure, either male or female.

During this brief period, his internal and external conflicts became so intense that he was on the verge of breakdown. One conflict in particular was foregrounded both in his life and in his work. Many different sources confirm that this twenty-year-old led a dissolute life. Although the descriptions of the orgies he was involved in almost certainly exaggerate the extent of his debauchery, his behaviour clearly went beyond the bounds of the fashionable immorality of his day. At the same time, according to a process we recognize only too well in this day and age, his heart became increasingly filled with a nostalgia for purity. This conflictual situation was as damaging to his nerves as it was to his morale. Mérimée wrote Stendhal a very revealing letter on this subject: in it he describes a drunken Alfred de Musset trying to accomplish an erotic performance while his fellow-debauchees looked on, and failing miserably (in Souvenirs d’égotisme Stendhal relates a similar adventure happening to himself; the reputation for virility shared by both writers was considerably dented as a result; doubtless Mérimée wished to console the one by recounting the ridicule suffered by the other, who was younger and much more reputed for his amorous activities and attributes! . . . )

These painful affairs are revealed in de Musset’s Confessions d’un enfant du siècle:

No matter where I was, no matter what occupation I forced upon myself, I could not stop thinking about women; the sight of a woman made me tremble. . . . I had experienced one of life’s greatest blisses, perhaps one of its rarest, the bliss of losing my virginity to love. But the result was that every time I thought about sensual pleasure it involved an idea of love; and that was my downfall. For since I could not stop thinking continuously about women, all I could do was spend day and night going over all these ideas of debauch, false loves and feminine treacheries which filled my mind. For me, to possess a woman was to love her; but I no longer believed that a true love was possible. . . .
The strange thing about de Musset was that he expected debauchery to free him from the torment of his obsession for absolute love. Debauchery was freedom, the initiation into pleasure detached from the soul. It was the ordeal of virility which every man had to endure in order to liberate himself, to gain self-knowledge and knowledge of life itself:

Faced with this ideal, some men recoil in horror: others, weak and terrified, are left like flickering shadows. . . . But certain men, surely unhappy, neither recoil nor waver, neither die nor forget. When their time comes to experience unhappiness, otherwise known as truth, they stride towards it resolutely. . . . They are intoxicated with the desire for knowledge. . . . They interrogate the world like the spies of God: their thoughts become as sharp as arrows, a lynx gnaws at their entrails. . . . If ordinary life is like a flat, transparent surface, then debauchees are always in touch with the depths beneath. . . .

Thus, between 1829 and 1835 a demonic spirit takes possession of this young poet whose heart craves the Absolute. The symbols of purity cast him down into degradation and depravity. To his eyes, God, absolute love, idealism and the yearning for perfection reflect images of filth, brutal reality, debauch, and the demonic principle. Torn between these two poles, he becomes a broken man. In this way Alfred de Musset accedes to the Faustian–Mephistophelean cycle, which is itself built upon the most ancient of symbolisms. He seeks salvation in poetry. The characters of Hassan in *Namouna* and Franck in *La coupe et les livres* are projections of the poet’s conflicts. Hassan is an insatiable Don Juan who proves himself capable of being in love and worthy of being loved. Although he consorts with a prostitute, Franck is still able to remember the mountains of his childhood and his first and only true love. The generous Rolla, ‘as naive as childhood itself, as good as pity, as great as hope’, squanders his fortune and poisons himself after one last night with a courtesan, who turns out to be chaste, and in love with him. She tries to save him. He dies, but ‘for a moment, they had both loved’. That moment is the moment of human salvation, the moment Faust had pleaded for, the moment when he could have said: ‘Stop! You are so beautiful!’ It is the moment when the principle of the eternal feminine intervenes, when the heavenly voice repelling the demon in the darkness cries of Margarete: ‘She is saved!’ After all the ordeals and mediations, it is the moment of harmony.

But if we are to comprehend de Musset’s genius fully, there is something more to be understood. In 1833 he wrote a play (*Les Caprices de
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Marianne) in which, for the first time, his inner conflict is projected in two antithetical characters and elaborated in their dialogue. Cœlio pits his craving for purity and his longing for love against Octave’s dissolute cynicism; the effort kills him.

In an analogous development, de Musset begins to separate the strands of his poetic opus. In 1830 he wrote Le Saule, a poem in which he recounts the dramatic death of Georgina Smolen and Tiburce; seduced and dishonoured, Georgina is shut up in a convent by her father; when she dies, her seducer is devastated, and he throws himself into the sea, singing the Willow Song from Rossini’s version of Shakespeare’s Othello which Georgina used to sing when they were in love. The opening lines of the poem show us a de Musset capable of a simplicity without eloquence or rhetoric: ‘There was suddenly a profound silence when Georgina Smolen stood up to sing. . . . How enchanting she was! How alive everyone’s faces became all of a sudden. . . .’

Le Saule is a long poem, almost a verse play, and de Musset published a fragment of it some time later under the title Lucie.

One evening, we were alone, and I was sitting by her side.
She bent her head, and as if in a dream,
Let her white hand drift over the harpsichord.
It was but a murmur; it recalled the soft wings
Of summer breezes gliding over distant reeds. . . .
The winds were still, the plain was deserted;
We were alone, pensive, and we were only fifteen. . . .

Here de Musset invites us to join him in purity, innocence and an adolescence unaware of pleasure and of evil. But for de Musset there is something deadly about purity; it is inseparable from the idea of death, and symbolism unites them:

Thus, two months later, you were laid in your tomb,
Thus, oh my chaste bloom, you faded away;
Your death was a smile as sweet as your life
And, in your crib once more, you were borne away to God. . . .

Like Goethe’s Faust, Alfred de Musset can be said to have had two souls. One was ‘heavenly’, divine, too divine, detached from the earth, unreal, and is embodied in adolescents (Georgina, Lucie, Deidamia). The other was obscure and earthly, too earthly, and is embodied in demonic characters: Hassan, Tiburce (the seducer), Franck (unscrupulously and uncontrollably ambitious), Mardoche,
Rolla (both of them debauchees who have fallen to the very depths of depravity). These two souls tore him apart. Sometimes he glimpsed the possibility of reconciling these two rival parts of his life and consciousness. He tried to achieve this unity, but to no avail. This unity was an impossible possibility.

There is no doubt that de Musset's life and work display a dialectical movement which can be summed up as follows:

**First moment:** the poet becomes aware of the division within himself, of his inner discord, and of the many conflicts which pit him against himself and other people ('society', the public which applauds him, the women who love him or trifle with him, action, work, etc. . . .); he projects these conflicts in a work, a figure or a character.

**Second moment:** the conflicts get more intense; his awareness of them becomes more acute, and he projects his duality in two separate characters, or in two separate but complementary works.

**Third moment:** he imagines that unity is possible; he attempts it and projects this attempt in a figure, a work or a character who tries to achieve the ultimate reconciliation with himself, with society, with the world – in a word, harmony – but who is defeated by the sheer impossibility of the task. Of these final characters, Lorenzaccio is the most tragic and the most significant.

It is even more appropriate to talk of a dialectical movement in that there is a perpetual dialogue, the dialogue de Musset holds with himself, with the world and society, with what he creates, a dialogue which is projected poetically and theatrically into the dialogues between the symbolic figures and characters.

If de Musset glimpsed a higher unity, only to find himself even more deeply divided, it was not because of an abstract idea. The reason was a lived ordeal: his love for George Sand.

When they met, de Musset was twenty-three and George Sand was thirty, with two children. They were at a dinner held by the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and they talked about literature. At first their friendship was predominantly literary, and it was several months before deeper, more passionate feelings were involved. Nothing could be further from 'love at first sight' than this stormy love affair about which so many books have been written. We have day-by-day, almost hour-by-hour accounts of what happened between these two illustrious lovers. As a reaction against the romantic theory of love, and to counter the image of themselves that de Musset and Sand might have wanted to bequeath to posterity, their biographers have managed to emphasize the artificial aspects of their passion, and the declamatory and even pathological attitudes adopted by de Musset (unbridled jealousy, the need to suffer, to inflict suffering, to live in a permanent state of
suffering). But on a simpler and more human level the available documents reveal a deep feeling, full of conflicts, but in which the conflicts produce a sincere exaltation before culminating in the final painful break-up. In George Sand, de Musset had hoped to find a woman who would equal his own intelligence and genius, and who at the same time could control him and help him to learn self-control. He wanted her to be a mistress, a friend, a strong, maternal woman, an inspiration: the total woman. He thought that being with her would reconcile the rival forces which were battling within his heart, 'the two angels who succeed in giving birth to a demon'. Thus he hoped that with her he could achieve a love which would be both absolute and human, the supreme unity: harmony.

The failure was swift and undeniable. Alfred de Musset was too profoundly divided for anything other than a superficial and temporary unity. He needed violent stimulations if he was to work at his writing: alcohol, gambling, frequent amorous adventures, debauchery. George Sand, on the other hand, needed to live an organized and disciplined life. She would write a set number of pages each day, while drinking glasses of milk!

Without trying to go deeply into them, let us take the words 'male' and 'female' as they are ordinarily used. In this liaison between two human beings who were close to each other and at the same time terribly different, the impression George Sand gives is of virility and genius, active, political, well-ordered and organized. De Musset, however, was the unstable element, whimsical, mercurial, fruitful—all characteristics usually attributed to femininity! It is no surprise that it was George Sand who inspired de Musset's masterpiece, Lorenzaccio: she thought of it first, wrote the rough draft, then left it to germinate in the poet's soul.

For de Musset, harmony, supreme unity, the unity of femininity and virility (the brilliant romantic dream: Balzac's Seraphitus–Seraphita), of purity and sensual pleasure, had taken a human form, and was to become realized in a living dream. Experience shattered this idea and produced a curious reversal: for the feminine Alfred de Musset, the masculine George Sand was a cruel and deceitful disappointment. In September 1833 the lovers were walking in the forest at Fontainebleau when suddenly de Musset began to hallucinate. He saw his own double: a young man dressed in black who could have been his own brother, the symbol of failure and division.

As for Lorenzaccio, his failure to resolve the dichotomy of the impossible possibility is much more profound. He struggles to attain what is possible: freedom. In the process he loses his youth and his pride. When he kills the usurper he realizes that he is ruined, and that
none of his friends has joined forces with him in his revolutionary action. Thus he discovers that the possibilities which seemed so close and so certain are impossible. His death is a dramatic symbol of failure. What seemed possible was just an adolescent dream.

When we examine the lives and works of the romantics in detail, we see that the dialectic of romanticism is made up of divisions and strange reversals (and how strange indeed: they map out the path for the dialectic of alienation-disalienation-realienation-redalienation) which render romanticism and the lives of the romantics themselves so dramatic.

On close scrutiny, then, romanticism appears not only as a contradiction but as an explosion of interconnected contradictions at varying levels of consciousness and depth – some objective, others subjective. According to this analysis, the common element for the romantics and the national forms taken by romanticism would be the relation between possibilities and reality, a relation which was fictitious and dreamed of, but at the same time, lived out in praxis: in other words, the relation between possibilities and historical contradictions, the contradictions of that era.

To these historical contradictions, which were independent of their creative activity, the romantics added something of their own. Had they not done so, romanticism would not constitute a ‘cultural’ phenomenon. It would remain stranded on the level of empirical living, blind and spontaneous. Or it would shrink to the level of an ideology. What they added was an attitude which aimed simultaneously to intensify conflicts and to resolve them, to aggravate them and to make them tolerable by offering them a fictitious and lived solution within their plays or novels. This attitude functioned as a mediation between lived experience and the work of art. From this point of view, the romantic aesthetic can be defined as a way of living and communicating. Therefore it was a sociological fact, but one which was determined by the elaboration of the work of art, and by the profound toil of symbolization and stylization. Occupying the entire range of the semantic field, and giving priority to symbols, this attitude attempted to stimulate the work of art, which in turn would condense and control the total semantic field. It would then resolve the contradictions polarized within the semantic field, and maybe even those contradictions concealed within social practice.

This would account for the apparently irrational (absurd) character of romanticism, as well as for the links it maintained with an era of hair-splitting rationality. Historians and critics have frequently pointed out the antithesis between romanticism and cold reason. They have been less observant when it comes to the way in which romanticism
and the romantics identified bourgeois rationality with reason as a general entity. And only rarely have they described the paradoxical relation between the cult of pure spontaneity and the romantic’s overindulgence in psychological analysis of the intellectualist and rationalist variety. Their conclusion – that romanticism was irrationalist – is therefore somewhat hasty. In fact, a non-dialectical analysis cannot hope to understand either the contradictions we have mentioned or the unity of their elements, since it must fail to grasp the various conflicts and their implications and elements simultaneously, as a totality. Instead it defines romanticism quite clearly and rationally as something absurd, even intentionally so, given to irrational gestures, pathos, frenzies, a kind of ‘existential’ ordeal.

What a tangle of contradictions! We have isolated a few of them. But many more remain.

On the specifically aesthetic level, in terms of their works, the romantics mixed the different genres together. This fact is well known. But it was precisely by challenging the autonomy of the genres in order to combine them that they discovered how one genre related to another. For example, they revealed the link between poetry and music in opera, and the link between tragedy and farce. What they concocted was not just a random mixture. They brought an analysis and a dialectic into art, with possibly fatal consequences: the beauty of ugliness, the fascinating, the interesting. Using beauty as a starting point and aspiring to a new beauty which they glimpsed and sometimes grasped in harmony, they turned art and beauty into a dialectic. They negated beauty, and in the process they extended the field of aesthetic experience to an incomparable degree – even to the extent of exploring the total semantic field, including vocabulary in the widest sense of the word. They compromised beauty by making art synonymous with social experience. This dialectic transformed beauty into interest.

What an explosion of contradictions! The contradiction between bitter resentment and the boundless sympathy which breaks through the boundaries of ‘self’. The contradiction between action, effort and risk, and passive melancholy. The contradiction between the independence of the artist and art in the service of the people, of religion, of nationalism.

**Contradiction: cosmopolitanism–nationalism**

Romanticism breaks out all over Europe. It springs from a cosmopolitan culture in which France, the French language and French literature had played a predominant role (in the eighteenth century).
Romanticism replaces this European culture with a European movement with nationalist orientations. It is true that at first Madame de Staël offers Germany as an example to France (1810); it is true that after France was defeated, its writers sought to introduce a wide variety of foreign influences, some of which were wildly exotic. In every European country, however, romanticism has popular and nationalist pretensions; it takes classicism to task for its bonds with Antiquity. It is this nationalistic aspect which comes to the fore in France in and around 1830.

**Contradiction: modernism and the return to the past**

The romantics call themselves ‘modern’; they take the cult of the present so far that it becomes a snobbism, a dandyism. This is their way of opposing the men of the Revolution, and romanticism does tend (and it is only a tendency) to take a reactionary stance. But it is involved in a new contradiction: its modernism involves making a fetish of Christianity, chivalry and the Middle Ages. When the romantic places this mask over bourgeois reality, and on his own face, it does not blind him to the present of which he is a part, since his wish is to be modern. Now the present in England and France is bourgeois society, and in Germany and Russia, semi-feudal and semi-bourgeois society. The romantic seeks his roots in the past, and mixes this nostalgia with contemporary criticism of bourgeois society, which is itself inextricably linked with pre-Revolutionary critical attitudes (Rousseau, for example).

Thus de Musset calls himself the child of his century, as indeed he is, at the very instant when he is expressing nostalgia for Antiquity and the age of faith (see *Rolla*). The same contradiction can be seen in Balzac’s works, as well as in Balzac the man, though with a different emphasis and a different solution.

**Contradiction: religiosity and revolt (Titanesque, Promethean, satanic)**

The romantic torments himself because he needs a ‘profound’ and ‘authentic’ link with men and the world. He imagines that religious feeling is eminently equipped to provide this link because of its supposed ability to conjure up ‘presence’. He feels nostalgia for faith, and vituperates all those who have used ridicule to destroy it (such as Voltaire). But at the same time ‘romanticism’ rebels against religion in so far as it is an ideology (dogma), an institution (the Church), and even an emotion. It also rebels when religious feeling is externally imposed and becomes a burden upon individual freedom.
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Romanticism seeks the solution to this contradiction in a Promethean and satanic attitude. De Musset’s Satanism is evident in *Rolla*, and even more so in his dramatic poem *La coupe et les lèvres*, where the hero adopts holy values only to profane them and to parade this profanity in front of other people. His attitude reaches extremes of ostentatious blasphemy, creating a curious type: the atheist who is obsessed with religion, and is more of a believer than those who genuinely believe.

*Contradiction: subjectivity and feeling for the outside world. Or perhaps: individualism and love for mankind and people in general (or simply a liking for crowds)*

The romantic’s anxious and exasperated ‘self’ aspires to recognize or lose itself by grasping the ‘other’: nature, humanity in general, humanity as particularized by the people.

The romantic has a wide range of methods at his disposal to intensify the subjective feeling of his own existence and power (*self-mise en scène*, megalomania, the theory of the poet as seer), and he will not hesitate to use them in his quest to become ‘Titanesque’. But the process leads to self-destruction. De Musset is constantly destroying the passionate states he worships, his loves, his dreams. He negates them by irony until, having annihilated his own genius in dissoluteness and debauchery, he begins destroying his own self. One moment he experiences a disgust for life and a nostalgic craving to be distanced from it; the next his triumphalist enthusiasms and his disproportionate expressions of joy know no bounds. It is difficult to say where the one ends and the other begins.

Thus, without *choosing*, without perceiving that the need to opt can be a freedom (*today we are able to paint romanticism as something irrational, but why this ‘modern’ need to be forever opting and choosing?*), the children of the nineteenth century loved God (harmony) and the gods, Prometheus and Satan. They loved the darkness which is as necessary to harmony as the deep sounds of the bass are fundamental to musical chords. They found the habit of introspection in what Madame de Staël called ‘the Christian tradition of repentance’, but this did not stop them from seeking inspiration from the simplicity of ancient and primitive times. For all their blasphemies, they were more devout than Christians in their churches. Together the romantics wove a magic tapestry of nostalgia, spleen, lust for life, triumphant and febrile absorption in the present, and the cult of *otherness*: the distant, unlimited, inaccessible, impossible *elsewhere*.66

All these contradictions share a common thread: the deep and
philosophically obscure notion of nature. And this notion itself is so bursting with contradictions that the very concept of it explodes. Previously, in the eighteenth century, although the inner contradictions of this concept were already deep-rooted, they were maintained and disguised by ‘common-sense’ ideology. Man and nature, nature and culture – these were inseparable, perceived as such, and maintained as such in the works of the greatest artists. But now they begin to be torn asunder, and to go their own antithetical ways within the praxis and theory of life and art.

For eighteenth-century philosophy, \(^{67}\) nature taken anthropologically meant the natural and fundamental equality of human beings, their basic goodness and perfectibility, and an optimism justified by the idea of primitive innocence and simplicity. Conceptually, this point of view implies that man contains the meaning of nature. A higher form of life than nature, man is able to exploit its demands and possibilities, and as a superior being, even if he cannot explain nature, he is able to supersede it and go beyond its limits. Immediately this notion becomes linked with the glorification of values such as the ideology of democracy and revolutionary critique in its various phases. The romantics use it to justify the ‘languidness induced by possibilities’. Via Feuerbach, it enters into Marxism.

Taken cosmologically, the same notion designates being-in-itself, the limitless external world, which is objective, and therefore unfathomable and inaccessible. This means that nature holds the key to the riddle, but conceals it. It could be that this unknown secret contains an irreversible and painful destiny (existence, the final catastrophe, nihilism).

These anthropological and cosmological principles are both present in romanticism. They come together, they conflict, they separate, all the while retaining their antithetical and mutually antagonistic character. Harmony was supposed to unite them, but such supreme unity cannot be sustained – if, that is, it can even be achieved in the first place. Certainly the poet himself has not found it. He glimpses it, and seems to grasp it at moments of emotional crisis, only to feel it slipping from his fingers in separate strands. This is when the problem of mediation between unity and separation, between the cosmos and the human, arises. Hence Novalis’s famous remark: ‘The more autonomous man is, the more refined the mediations become: fetishes, stars, animals, heroes, idols, gods, God-as-Man.’ This list omits the devil as a mediation, as well as Prometheus, the Titans, and the principle of revolt! The romantic has his own suggestions. Who and what? The highest mediation of all will be poetry and the poet. Himself. Yet he is not capable of mediating fully between the cosmic
and the human, and between nature and culture. He cannot create harmony, nor can he sustain it. It becomes apparent that this possibility of possibilities is in fact impossible. The most the poet can do is run through the possible confusions as though practising his musical scales, and improvise on themes such as the Golden Age, the innocence of childhood, purity, virginity, the landscape of dreams, crystal, stone, metal.

It is a deadly slope, and he climbs up and down it as on some Jacob's Ladder leading from the humble, sheltering earth to the skies, the stars, the constellations, the heavens. Clinging to the rungs of this ladder, he tries to find the perfect, fundamental chord in which all the dissonances will be resolved. But he never will.

This is a vital clew, an Ariadne's thread into the ideological labyrinth of 'modernity', but we will not follow it all the way. A couple of points, however:

First, what was most fruitful was the conflict (the dialectical unity) between the two notions of nature, a conflict which involved the necessity for a supersession. On the level of this conflict alone we can grasp the dialect of need and desire, with need (nature: biology, physiology) undergoing numerous painful conflicts as it becomes transformed into desire (culture: society, values, standards), human and social need, recognized as such. Marx wanted this supersession, and described it as the world where desire has been fulfilled and needs have become human powers. Perhaps this idea may provide us with the means to develop a new attitude.

If we separate the cosmological attitude and the anthropological attitude into two independent 'attitudes', we cannot give either one of them priority over the other. We will need to make a critique of anthropology in its present form, since it thinks itself capable of defining man (as essence or existence) by culture or technicity, and therefore without reference to nature and the world. Anthropology has become abstract – or, to be more exact, pseudo-concrete (culturalist, structuralist). On the other hand, for the last hundred years the cosmological attitude, with its increasingly negative view of humanity, has been running wild. It, too, has become pseudo-concrete.

In France, to begin with, the anthropological concept of nature tended to dominate. The reverse was true of Germany. But after 1850, cosmological romanticism takes over everywhere. And it is then, and only then, that the romantic experience produces its ultimate consequences: symbolist literature, expressionism, etc., bringing a violent burst of irrationality into thought and sensibility, together with other new elements, via history and action. Surrealism interpreted the cosmological principle subjectively as the unmediated communication of
the individual (purely spontaneous, therefore unconscious) with the cosmos, and developed this idea as far as it would go. The consequences of this attitude are still with us today, but this should not be allowed to overshadow the importance of the 1917 Revolution in inspiring and reanimating 'assumed' attitudes of revolt, defiance and negation. And yet, well into the twentieth century, this is when the image becomes a drug to be used and abused in the search for the Absolute. The fetishizing of the image culminates in the image-as-thing and the thing-as-image (mirrors, crystal, metal . . .). The role of the image as a mediation between man and the world disappears, or is immobilized. 'I will strengthen my delirium,' shouts Eluard; while Breton screeches: 'You have no idea just how far our hatred of logic can lead us.' Similarly, existentialism can be taken as one of cosmological romanticism's last gasps, with the injection of a few new elements which gradually begin to predominate - in the thought of J.-P. Sartre, at any rate.

Thus, according to our analysis, the destiny of romanticism was to sever the cosmological from the anthropological, dissolving their conflictual unity and giving predominance to the former. This leaves the problem of supersession wide open, and neither present-day materialism (which oscillates between the cosmological and the anthropological without ever making a stand, and indeed without even understanding the question) nor 'cultural' (culturalist) or structuralist idealism is capable of addressing it.

From this point of view, and in relation to this general schematic, it would be interesting to return to our analytical description of the movements of the romantic consciousness, that is, in subjectivity and in the individual. This analysis would therefore be valid for the 'children of the century' and for the century as a whole: those children's children.

A general destiny is expressed in each particular 'romantic soul', and in each of the moments experienced and 'assumed' by it. First moment: the adolescent feels an active sympathy with the world, life and men, and refuses to be resigned and humble. Infinity opens out before him. It is a vision or a premonition (already felt or glimpsed) of the possibility of harmony between the anthropological principle and the cosmological principle.

Second moment: disappointment follows disappointment, impossibility raises its head, resentment grows; the best social relations - love and friendship - become metaphorical and rationalized. They are no longer empirical social practices, but good and worthy inner attitudes, exemplifying goodwill. The anthropological becomes separated from the cosmological; at first it appears solid, but this solidity
quickly evaporates and disappears. Goodwill is not self-sufficient; it lives a life of its own alongside desires and pleasures and frustrated passions, waiting; it gives birth to melancholy and spleen and self-irony. Hence the third movement: this division promotes the feeling of social isolation and the idea of solitude as something grandiose, an impetus in the quest for all that is vague, limitless and undefined: pure nature, with all its mysterious and unfathomable powers.

Each of these moments dramatizes itself and lives by intensifying its contradictions until it reaches the point of total collapse or disintegration, only to leap ahead into the next moment. First of all, there is spontaneity, with all its elemental strength. It marches forth against the Philistines, against the petty selfishness and trivialities of everyday life; it is a moment of native purity, an already rather disdainful quest for sympathy and love. Then, just when the values of humanity are being proclaimed, along comes negation. It is a satanic power, a challenge to men and the world; the moment of affirmation for humanity is also the moment of revolt against the bestiality of life and the superhumanity of the gods. Finally, there is a return to infinity in the form of an indeterminate cosmology, with the rediscovery of totality (inadequately rediscovered in the fictional mode: half-dream, half-abstraction) acted out like some theatrical performance.

For the romantic, the imagination is not simply a function and a domain. It is a privileged experience, an activity, a productive investigation. The imagination intervenes at every stage to explore the present moment, its possibilities and impossibilities. Its role is of the highest importance. The image it produces is externalized at first, but becomes increasingly crucial, reinforced by symbolism on one hand and by the very passions which give it its strength on the other.

Every self-acknowledged inadequacy is dramatized and hidden beneath a metaphorical mask of violence. The metaphorical figures are all projected as symbolic beings which serve as representations, mediations, compensations, substitutes and last resorts. These beings are generally feminine: fiancées, wives, mothers, feminine angels, virgins, whores.

And here is another quite important observation. With the change from the anthropological to the cosmological — their disjunction, and the predominance given to the cosmological by romanticism and its sequels — there is a concomitant change in symbolism. The prime symbols begin to lose value. At each of the moments, the received symbolism becomes codified, and then exhausted. At first the adolescent and the young girl symbolize the (possible) union between the anthropological and the cosmological, in harmony. Then they lose their importance. Either the woman is no longer a mediation, or she
becomes the fallen woman, the victim of a fate more powerful than human feelings, which expresses itself through men’s cruelty: the whore, the unfulfilled wife (whose marriage or adultery is also an act of prostitution). Soon Lady Dudley of _Le Lys dans la Vallée_ is replaced by Madame Bovary. But it is above all the child which becomes the prime symbol. It expresses several situations; it has several meanings, several concepts: pure nature, genuine spontaneity, original purity, the unconscious, the presence of the cosmic in all its disturbing profundity. The child _becomes_ the pivotal mediation: between dream and reality, between the poet and the world, between nature and culture. And this mediating role operates on both a real and a symbolic level. Thus that brilliant child-poet Rimbaud writes a poem about ‘seven-year-old poets’. The child and childhood become laden with myths and symbols. Then these myths and symbols become blurred. Something new (and somewhat painful) is about to be born. A psychologist in the _cosmological_ tradition of thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Hartmann discovers that childhood is not the age of grace but the age of anxiety, guilt and the recognition of conflicts: Freud. A symbol has died. We have returned to the present.

Carried out as part of a history, this has been a real as opposed to an abstract analysis. We will not prolong our investigation of its historical and ideological implications any further. Instead we will present it condensed in tabular form, with one grid giving a schematic account of classicism, and the other summarizing the characteristics of romanticism. Inevitably of a summary nature, these grids will not only offer a résumé of our analysis so far, but will also be useful guides for us when we continue it. They will attempt to determine a _totality_ for each important aesthetic trend.

Thus each grid will sum up the characteristics of a ‘world’, the world of classicism (or classicism considered as a world) and the romantic world. We will begin by dispelling a misunderstanding about the words themselves which would otherwise lead to confusion. We are concerned not with a _world-view_ but with an _aesthetic ‘world’_. According to the notion elaborated by Dilthey and Lukács, a _Weltanschauung_, or world-view, is essentially a _philosophical_ concept, a conceptual construction characterized by its internal coherence. It is a more or less complete philosophy – that is, more or less expertly elaborated by philosophers – which constructs a highly generalized discourse using the materials given in everyday discourse and _Erlebnisse_ (biographies). Hegel’s was one of the most ‘complete’ world-views. We certainly have no intention of challenging its importance, merely of specifying the problems its poses. Here we are talking about an _aesthetic world_. Circumstantial elements taken from history and
social practice, and therefore numerous (technological, social, ideological, anecdotal, etc.), are used in an activity which differs from philosophical activity. Aesthetic activity does not work upon concepts. It functions by making (the work of art), saying, and living. It does not confine itself to discourse. It works upon a material (which can be verbal, but if so, the words become raw materials to be worked upon, like colours or sounds).

Therefore we are dealing with very different categories from the ones which appear in philosophical Weltanschauungen: not only the working of materials, but also imagination (and the presence of symbols), and a particular historicity. It is true that art imitates art, and that every new artist follows the path mapped out by his predecessors. He begins by copying. It is nevertheless true that no matter what its origins are, the work of art can exist only through originality. Imitation is an interruption, a mere re-presentation of those transitions and developments which lead to renewal in art. Art and the history of art are riven with discontinuities. The social context and the partial 'content' they extract from it are only signposts along the forking pathway which leads from construct to construct via the mediation of searching, creative labour and a subjective experience which grasps a more or less vast fragment of social practice.

Aesthetic activity tends to use the elements or 'formants' at its disposal to create – or, rather, produce – a 'world', the world of art, in which it recognizes itself and which corresponds to the real world, but as its image: the world made transparent, powerful, amplified, purified, liveable – in a word, beautiful. It transforms the real world, transfigures it. It 'reflects' it only in a very specific sense of the word. It is not concerned with logical coherence. It produces an alternative reality within the real world by making the imaginary real. Hence the specific incoherence of fiction, symbolism and images, which have no need to seek logical unison among themselves. This effort to construct a 'world' produces certain tendencies, from which we may single out classicism and romanticism. We would go so far as to present these as essentially contradictory tendencies, were we not mindful of the need to avoid an oversimplified representation of art and art history as the result of the eternal struggle between classicism and romanticism. In fact, other elements are involved: the exhaustion, saturation and breakdown of schools, images and symbols, and perhaps of art itself. In any event, our analytical study and presentation of the totality are in no way authorized to introduce concepts which may have a possible validity for philosophy, such as the world-view, or Weltanschauung. The work of art does not embody a pre-existing Weltanschauung. To sum up: we insist that although it must not be seen
as a ‘structural’ disjunctive, aesthetic creativity has an autonomy vis-à-vis philosophy, just as it has vis-à-vis knowledge, science, technology and everyday life. It is a specific productive activity – that of the artist – and in its turn it divides up into antithetical trends. But ‘divided’ does not mean ‘separated’ (since these trends can be antagonistic, interconnected, interactive and mutually transferable, it follows that they can be superseded in the course of their conflict).

Of course, the grids we are about to present will require a lengthy commentary if we are to continue the analysis, adjust the schematics and give a certain mobility to the apparently fixed totalities they determine. This commentary needs to reveal the movements within each of the aesthetic ‘worlds’ which our analysis has constructed (although they cannot be regarded as finite constructs, as they are never more than ‘tendencies’). It will also have to demonstrate how they interrelate, and if the grids themselves are to be understood, we must consider one of these common traits without further ado. Created by art and for art – in other words, to be ‘lived’ aesthetically – these aesthetic ‘worlds’ are appropriate only to a class society, and meaningful only in terms of one. In so far as they are inhabitable ‘worlds’ and acceptable modes of living, they erase class characteristics; they marginalize them; they make it possible to forget them, and above all to forget what is intolerable about them, in an effort to live life to the full. But this does not mean that class characteristics are eradicated. This is the context and the ‘content’ which our analysis and critique have addressed; and rightly so; but in the process, we have already smashed the world of art. It is such a little world, so small and so splendid, like a looking-glass and at the same time like a crystal ball, a mere reflection, but with the power to transform, like beads of dew pregnant with life-giving abundance.

Classicism

*Principal condition:* cohesion – cohesion between the individual, the social domain and nature, cohesion between representations and actions, cohesion between ideologies and social practice (it is theoretically of little importance whether this cohesion is genuine or faked, illusory or effectively operative). Acceptance of the state and of power. Hierarchies internalized to such a degree that even the structure of consciousness and the ‘functions’ and ‘faculties’ of subjectivity are governed by it. Subordination of passion to reason, defined as the subjective internalization of power (the state) and the knowledge of social reality. Acceptance of models and rules as coherent units raised to the level of values and higher realities. The possible subordinated to the real.
Mode of social existence: imitation – imitation of the high by the low, socially speaking – in other words, imitation according to social hierarchy. Imitation is turned into a rational method, both ethically and aesthetically; hence the predominance of an ethos which inextricably confuses morality and art. This leads to the distinction between unsuccessful imitation (copies, adaptations), such as the imitation of the child or the pupil in a school – and successful imitation, the imitation which approximates closely to the model and to the master or masters.

Symbolic age (not presented as such): adulthood (male).

Palpable symbols: the sun and solar myths, an organized cosmos (moons and planets around a central sun). The king, the lord or the chief (power accepted, with its possibilities and its tragic conflicts), surrounded by his vassals and subordinates.

Symbolic season and time: summer, noon.

Symbolic materials: light, sky.

Dominant virtues: balance, virility, acceptance (of others, of society, of cosmic and human order, of self), adhesion.

Pilot art form: architecture (as a visual art, lit by the sun and comprising order and symmetry, a metaphor for the accepted world, and governing the form and decor of the subordinate arts: sculpture, painting and theatre).

Romanticism

Fundamental conditions: the interconnection of conflicts and contradictions, whether suffered blindly or consciously thought through. Rational critique lived through the emotions. The rejection of external hierarchies, protest, refusal to obey authority (patriarchal, familial, religious, moral, political). Social classes not thought of or recognized per se, but an acute and angry perception of class barriers, hindrances and barriers, and therefore of caste and class privileges. Ambiguity in the modes chosen to escape from this situation (genuine and at the same time phoney, rebellious yet not revolutionary, not revolutionary yet close to the revolutionary attitude, fictitious yet real, utopian and at the same time practical). Initial chaos and confusion, with no orderly relation imposed from outside or from above between the external and the internal, the objective and the subjective, the individual and the collective, the projection of the self beyond the self and the internalization of the outside world within the self. Not so much the constant and absolute predominance of imagination and passion as the perpetual possibility for passion and imagination to go on the offensive, to control reason and the
functions of the real'. Contradictions intensified to such a degree that even the effort to resolve them becomes contradictory. Predominance of the possible – the impossible – over the real.

**Mode of social existence:** originality – deliberate originality, looked for, asserted, with pathos becoming an assertive mode, a mixture of the spontaneous, the affective and the symbolic. Rationalized protest against reason and trivial order immediately turned into discourse.

**Symbolic ages:** youth, childhood, adolescence (female).

**Palpable symbols:** waves, undulations, vibrations, oscillations, sound resonating to the very depths of matter and the cosmos.

**Symbolic seasons and times:** spring and autumn, dawn and twilight, night.

**Symbolic materials:** water, earth, fire.

**Dominant virtues:** enthusiasm, exaltation, refusal (revolt).

**Pilot art form:** music (with the idea of harmony, by which the unheard-of can be created and the possible achieved – harmony, that supreme impossibility: the resolution of dissonance).

**Commentaries**

There are a great many well-known texts which would easily confirm the accuracy of these 'totalities'. When Sainte-Beuve wrote (Monday, 12 April 1858) that ‘the honest and glorious development of life in the full light of the sun is the initial background against which symmetrical palaces and temples came to be constructed’, he paints a little picture of classicism which confirms our grid, even if the meaning of the elements and the way they are disposed are radically different. And because he confirms our analyses so well, it would be somewhat churlish of us to say how much we despise him. He goes on to praise classicism for its consonance with its own era and social context, ‘with the prevailing principles and powers’, and states in an extraordinarily coherent manner that *unease* has never been a principle of beauty, for beauty is tranquillity. Just listen to the ‘psychologist’ Sainte-Beuve’s version of how they spoke, those mighty figures from the great centuries past, the centuries of Pericles, Augustus, Louis XIV: ‘under their beautiful sky, as though beneath an azure dome, the great poets and orators of those times: their songs of praise are still ringing in our ears ....’

If we take a classical play – *Phèdre*, for example – we will see the ‘world’ of classicism taken right to the point of perfection. Passed down by the Greeks, the myth is acted out in a well-ordered cosmos, the cosmos of the sun, where light is identified with power and general order, and darkness with disorder:
TOWARDS A NEW ROMANTICISM?

Oh shining founder of an ill-starred line,
You, whom my mother dared to boast her sire,
Who blush perhaps to see me thus distraught,
Sungod, for the last time I look on you.68

With these words Phèdre begins the tragedy. In the light of the sun, in the chaos the sun illuminates and organizes, there is a disturbance (Hubris). In other words, there is a rebellion by everything subservient to the order of things. There is also death, that fundamental disorder; during part of the tragedy death holds the male character captive in its shadowy domain, the living symbol of virility and outraged order, a hero at the peak of well-balanced maturity: Theseus. The interplay of inevitably obscure desires — passion, disquiet, darkness — threatens light and order — that is, power. And of necessity, through the tragic event, order is re-established:

Only as through a cloud I see the bright
Heaven and the husband whom I still defile.
But death, robbing my eyes of light, will give
Back the sun its tarnished purity.69

With these words Phèdre brings the tragedy to a close. It has been played out in the blinding presence of God — in other words, the Supreme Power. Death takes back that which has come from death. The sun and the light rediscover their imperturbable and implacable unity: pure and empty, they reign over the void once more, until such time as the event begins again, the disturbance which is the only-begetter of history.

Despite the extensive analyses which have gone into the elaboration of these grids, and the wide range of texts which can confirm their accuracy, they remain incomplete and not fully substantiated. More analyses are required.

For example, the argument that architecture was the pilot art form of classicism needs to be elaborated in more detail. Architecture obeys political power more directly than any other art. In the French classical theatre it determines the unity of place and the location: the city square, surrounded by palaces, or the central room in the palace — an antechamber, a courtyard, a gallery. It determines the three-dimensional perspective (an essentially urban way of seeing), the context of the ‘scenes’ and the subjects represented, and the scenery used in theatrical presentations, paintings and sculptures: it determines its content and form.

A more complete history of art would demonstrate how symbols
and the way they are used came to be given the function of constructing a ‘world’, the ‘world’ of art. Without some kind of concrete unity, neither classicism nor romanticism could have created the aesthetic ‘world’ they needed in which to exercise their own creativity. For classicism, this unity is the starting point, posed and supposed by the perfection of what has already been accomplished and made finite. For romanticism, it is the goal, something to be achieved by the struggles of passion and imagination. For classicism, unity is real, an already-accomplished possibility. It is recognizable and repeatable. For romanticism, unity remains a possibility, and nothing more. The work of art is an attempt to realize that possibility. It presents the transition from the possible to the real. During this creative endeavour, unity, perfection, harmony – the possibilities – are revealed as impossible – that is to say, incompatible with reality. The Absolute recedes. Classicism begins with myths, and explains them in accordance with established order, even though initially they may have a quite different meaning. Romanticism begins with symbols rather than myths (they are neighbours, but myth has a narrative action which symbolism lacks, and which presupposes a political power which is itself based on myth and ritual). Classicism turns myths into allegories; it freezes them to death. Romanticism creates symbols, but wears them out until they expire at the artist’s own hands. Both classicism and romanticism devour their own vital substance, but while for classicism this substance is composed of accomplished possibilities (possible possibilities), for romanticism it is made up of impossibilities (impossible possibilities).

In classicism, under the aegis of reason, myth takes on an absolute value right from the start. Socially and culturally accepted as the myth of political power, it immediately introduces a reversal and a substitution of functions in official ways of thinking. Whatever escapes from the control of political power and rebels against it becomes a pretext for the work of art; it even becomes its raw materials. Moreover, the artist imitates, and his creative labour on these raw materials begins with imitation. The artist may think that he is copying, but it is by imitating that he achieves originality. He never really knows how or when. It is clear that for imitation to give birth to an original work of art, a transformation must perforce take place, otherwise the work will remain mere imitation. When imitation is regulated and reduced to copying, it becomes barren. There is an ethos – the habitual ethical virtue, or the virtue of habit implied by imitation, maintained by the process of imitation and to all intents and purposes linked to the grand model by the simple fact that it imitates it – and this ethos renders aesthetics barren. It is this ethos which turns myth into allegory.
As for the artist — excellent craftsman that he is — he wields total control over his verbal, aural and pictorial raw materials. At a given moment he reverses his initial values and begins upsetting the rules, while shouting his support for them from the rooftops. His subjectivity is breaking through. He has begun to create. Maybe he thinks he is still imitating. Maybe he knows he is no longer imitating, but feels too guilty to admit it.

Thus the classical work of art provides our analysis with something atemporal to reflect upon, something linked to myths and imitating other works, beyond time and the passage of the centuries. Each work constitutes a timeless whole, and the complete works of a given artist also constitute a whole, which initially appears extrahistorical. Yet the closer we look, and the more analysis we bring to bear, the more the process of history becomes manifest: first as allusion, then as narrative, then as content. We realize that the work depends upon the very context from which it has become separated, but which remains visible like a watermark. Thus, if the classical work of art originates in imitation, atemporality, order and coherence, disguising contradictions so as to subordinate them to fundamental order, in the final analysis it starts presenting conflicts, making them present. Henceforth the hierarchy and structure contained no longer appear internalized and accepted. Something over and above mere adherence to rules and standards — to reason — becomes apparent: disturbance, hubris. Once more order conquers chaos, and gives it form; but the entities which make up the cult of plenitude, adulthood, balance and virility are seen to contain conflictive elements which will bring tragedy down upon them. It is a movement which reverses the opening situation and propels to the fore the (momentary) elements of disorder: woman, passion, adventure. In the ensuing struggle the true powers of authority are asserted and confirmed. Then, from the necessity imposed, springs the free contingency which allows for creativity: from the mixture of realism and myths, fiction is born. And yet originality, contingency, conflicts and fiction all become reabsorbed in the depths of the work of art.

Beauty is revealed as atemporality, as order conquered and imposed, as power confirmed, as the first and last reality, the original and ultimate appearance, the supreme and supremely effective illusion. Unity is the rule, the form, the standard, and also the hidden content.

As for romantic individualism, its connections are more symbolic than mythic, because the imagination uses symbols, reinventing them by modifying them, reworking them by confronting them with inner experience and external ordeals. This individualism internalizes the
world, with its representations, situations, contradictions and ideologies; it ‘subjectivizes’ them on an ambiguous level which is both emotional and imaginary, affective and ideological. This level is that of pathos, which rejects mediations and forces them to submit. Thus, subjectively, the romantic artist works on symbolisms which already exist in a particularized form, and he turns his back on the great generalities: myths, concepts, standards. He accepts social symbols and images which refer to society, adopting their historical and objective content as the content of his own private conscience and, moreover, projecting on to them his own relation – conscious or not – with nature. Thus he rashly and carelessly substitutes the subjective for the objective, emotionally charged images for concepts, and feelings for ideas. But then, from all this symbolism, imagination and fiction, and via subjectivity, a concern with ‘lived experience’ is born; in other words, an emotional realism emerges. From contingency, necessity is born again. Although he has set himself up outside the social and historical domain, the romantic artist finds himself back within it. Thus our aesthetic responses to and subsequent analyses of these works will reveal that hidden deep beneath their manifest and recognized historical content – anecdotes, interpretations and events – lie durable psychic and artistic symbols.

To sum up ironically, we could show how historians and critics have followed in the footsteps of audiences and readers: it is the fascinating atemporality of classical works which attracts them initially. But then they become interested in matters of a more temporal kind: court intrigues (Bérénice, etc.), Jansenism (Phèdre), or even French landscape gardening. We can see a similar process, but in reverse, when critics begin their study of de Musset with his biography and love life; they go on to discover the historical or passionate anecdotes which went into the writing of Lorenzaccio; and finally they stumble across the play’s underlying meaning, which is as a tragedy of revolution, a drama of freedom. The misunderstandings have been so deep-rooted that this process has taken more than a century!

Thus the historian is always in danger of falling into a trap, and allowing himself to be fooled by some deceptive reflection in the mirror of time. What is essential is not the work’s external relation with its conditions (economic, historical, sociological, or simply anecdotal or biographical). It is the work’s internal movement and the sequence of actions which go to make up an ‘aesthetic world’, using existing materials (myths and symbols, images and emotions, ordeals and experiences) and available channels (the public, the groups involved, theatre companies, publishers, accepted genres, vocabulary, etc.).

Therefore the essential thing is to analyse dialectical movements
and restore their totality. The conflictive relation between romant­
cism and classicism is one such dialectical movement. It is not a
question of movements of the soul or psychological attitudes, as
Sainte-Beuve thought. Classicism and romanticism are two ways of
creating an aesthetic world. They are two tendencies locked in semi­
permanent conflict, within the domain of art as a specific – i.e.
specialized – activity.

According to this analysis and from this point of view, romanticism
drew its aesthetic lifeblood from symbols which were of a social rather
than an inherently aesthetic nature; this was because they contained
the relation of social (cultivated) man with nature and self, and this
relation was a relatively stable one. The fact that these symbols were
being used – consciously or not – indicates how deep the romantic
investigation went; because they become manifest and conscious on a
certain ‘level’ of social practice, these symbols cannot be understood
without an overall map of nineteenth-century society and its ferments.
Romantic art fed off and prolonged a creative excitement which came
from beyond its own microcosm. Within this microcosm it defined a

Now our era, the twentieth century, shows no trace of any similar
attempts to elaborate symbolisms, either in the deep-lying strata of
society and on the various levels of social consciousness, or in specif­
cally aesthetic activity. It is as though there were something (but
what, and therefore, who?) resistant to symbolization, or as though
symbols had lost their potency. We are sustained by ancient symbols,
affective nuclei which have come down to us from a distant past, sym­
bolizing the direct and immediate interpersonal relations of primitive
societies, and the patriarchal or matriarchal blood relations which
have been preserved up to the present day in private life (which, as it
happens, is becoming highly ‘privatized’ again). These have not van­
ished. But the only time symbols (in the precise meaning of the term)
and durable affective nuclei appear in art is when they are being
undermined. And it is important to point out that contemporary lit­

ature is slowly eroding symbols such as the mother, the wife, the
virgin, the knight, the conquistador and the child by transforming
them into themes. A detailed critical study of works and transform­
ations would have no difficulty confirming this argument. But as it
happens, such confirmation would be superfluous, since the impor­
tant issue lies elsewhere. The important thing is to take note of the
way symbols and symbolisms are being replaced by myths. What play­
wright has not written his ‘Antigone’ or his ‘Oedipus’? Until the
contemporary dramatist writes in the Graeco-tragico-neoclassical
genre, he cannot be considered even to have passed his baccalauréat. Myths are back and, with them, the philosophy of myths and reflection on myths. No one seems to see the disconcerting aspects of it all: a reliance on a form of thought and a profound sensibility which, though uprootable, is untransplantable – the degradation and dismantling of the myths in question – the death of the symbols and symbolisms which had effectively replaced myths in an individualized way, by clearing the terrain for the imaginary and assuming the old powers of myth and magic.

We have linked the formation of romantic symbolism (or, more exactly, the romantic use of symbols) and the aesthetic operation which used symbols as its basis with the relations within bourgeois society as a whole. This was consolidating itself at that time, and it was also consolidating the small, frustrated groups it encompassed and intimidated: young people, women, educators, intellectuals (including writers and artists themselves). Around 1830 this society looks very peculiar indeed. Never has there been such a ‘total’ social network. It is armour-plated with ‘structures’: the Civil Code, the state, the more or less valid and concrete representation of partial interests in so-called general interests, and in the state. But despite its cast-iron ‘structures’ it is composed of small groups dissatisfied with the social network and their status within it. The politics of the situation are extremely complicated. Moreover, the totalization of society and its ‘socialization’ – the increasing number of relations and communications – are accompanied by an extreme individualism. It is this triple movement – socialization, particularization, individualization – and its conflicts which give birth to the romantic sensibility, which was more important than ideology (or rather, ideology lived out in the mode of sensibility). We have already pointed out how the romantic individual protests against totality by emphasizing particularities.

But what of the working class? In 1830 and up until about 1848, it is one of the partial groups, aggressed, oppressed and dissatisfied with the social entity which it helps to constitute. Therefore it belongs to the romantic movement at large. Its participation in it is both active and passive: active via utopian socialism, in so far as it represents preoccupations inspired by the proletariat and heralds a future; passive in the works of authors who ‘look into’ proletarian life. Right up until 1848, the proletariat becomes directly or indirectly symbolized through the pity aroused by its sufferings. We can see this symbolism operating in the novels of Eugène Suè or Victor Hugo much more clearly than in Balzac, who is situated, like Stendhal, more in the 1830s. It is a continuation of romantic symbolism (the prostitute, the outcast, the great chivalric spirit, etc.).
As soon as the working class starts to become active on the historical and political scene, many changes occur. Its intervention forces romantic poetry or poetry influenced by romanticism outwards to the cosmos. It challenges the ‘anthropological principle’ as a practical principle for moral and aesthetic life. But above all, it brings its own symbolism to an end. This could be one of the explanations for the violence of Marx's critique (in The Holy Family) of Eugène Sue, and of Sue’s neo-Hegelian German commentators. Obviously Marx tends to expel symbols and symbolism from the realm of knowledge, and to identify them with mystified consciousness. It appears that the proletarian attitude is not prepared to accept the symbolic transposition of its social conditions and practical experiences. The proletariat is burdened with precise problems, direct preoccupations and practical requirements. They are those of social man: need, labour and suffering. The proletariat as a class and the proletarian as an active individual refuse to allow their humanity to be reduced to a symbolic representation. They want recognition (of a spontaneous kind as well as in ideology and science) on a practical level, and first and foremost they want labour to be recognized as a dimension of man. They call for the authentication of productive labour. They demand concrete satisfactions. In the work-well-done ethic, which dates from the beginnings of the working class qua class, the construct ('beauty') is seen as synonymous with the product of craft labour. The working class boldly negates ‘values’ other than its own. Unwittingly, unwillingly, this proletarian negativity also operates against aesthetic activity, because by rejecting alienation and reification it also refutes all active transpositions. As a result, social and practical opposition to the reification of man leads proletarian activity as a specific class activity to be completely indifferent to questions of art. While there is art, there will be alienation and reification.

In Balzac's typology of humans as animal species, symbolism was already on the wane. It is visible only in the supersensitive individuals he presents as metaphors for the absolute (Le Lys dans la Vallée, Séraphitus–Séraphita, Raphaël in The Wild Ass's Skin, etc.). A few years later, in Madame Bovary, we need to look very closely if we are to detect any symbolism. What does Emma Bovary symbolize? The failure of the Revolution as lived by Flaubert? The sufferings and humiliations of France under Badinguet? The defeat of femininity? The alienation of love? Yes, all these things, and more besides. And Flaubert himself, too, but not as something lying in wait beneath a symbol, waiting to be revealed. Flaubert is an individual being who carries his meaning within himself, the meaning of his destiny, given and signified in a narrative.
Everything would lead us to believe that the working class found symbolism unacceptable, and helped to hasten its already-rapid decline. The only symbols it created were political ones (and these were emblems rather than symbols). Images became crystallized around the lives and names of political leaders, heroes and personalities. And so symbolism began to wither away, most notably in the movement which bears its name, and which operated with superficial stylistic flourishes and empty ‘thingified’ words. And this is why the symbolist writers began to rely increasingly on myths and neoclassicism.

Does the working class still need art as a mediation to define itself? Does it still need constructs as mediations by which to define its actions and horizons? It is by no means certain that it does.

Workers are significant because of their numbers and groupings – and, being workers, because of their physical strength. They bring with them a realism which swings from the epic to the trivial (in Hugo and Zola as well as in Sholokhov). Images of workers and their labour have never attained the scope and value enjoyed by symbols. For all their connotations of crafts of ages past, the hammer and sickle are signs and emblems, not symbols. Images of labour have a representative aspect and value, figurative of labour and the worker in society at the moment when the working class comes into being, above all as a laborious class, since leisure is not available to it. The good worker, the high-powered worker, the worker-hero are all representations, not symbols. They are abstract – or, better still, ‘typical’ – representations of productive activity and its intensification, and of the demands and constraints of accumulation. If you like, they represent socialism in the making. But it is extremely difficult for them to attain the status of types, because their ‘representativeness’ is more ideological than aesthetic; it is always provisional, and relative to circumstances which ideology can always dramatize and ‘represent’ as being decisive. No sooner have sensibilities and emotions recognized them than they fade from view again, leaving the imagination unaroused. Because it is interesting, proletarian or socialist realism can never be symbolic. Therefore, the realist aesthetic (which is in fact nothing like an aesthetic, since it defines itself as a method of political effectiveness) successfully prolongs and perfects the process which began on the side of the bourgeoisie: the destruction of symbolism, and the substitution of the interesting for the beautiful (with all the subcategories of the interesting: the important, the decisive, the amazing, the amusing, the unusual, the boring, etc.). It seems to all intents and purposes that the new relations of class and production could embody themselves only in representations (conceptual, or functioning as such, but clad in more or less picturesque tatters). Unable to find any symbols,
revolutionary or socialist writers also turn to myths: Gorki finds Prometheus, and Stalin and the Stalinists find Antaeus, who drew strength from contact with the earth, just as the Party draws strength from its contact with the masses, etc. It is both odd and surprising that the proletariat should have avoided symbolisms, but not abstract representations, and myths even less — mythic stories, mythifications and mystifications. Just like myths in archaic societies, modern myth contains history, religiosity, the cosmic vision projected on to the social dimension. It crystallizes affectivity. It can safely rub shoulders with ideology and institutions. Yet it quickly wears thin. In their eagerness to glorify art, or to make use of it, the working class and socialism could finish myth off for good. Because in principle class, the relations of class, the state and political power are scientifically recognizable, and lead to the development of techniques for propaganda and political organization (tactics and strategies); they do not lend themselves to indirect expression. They signify, clearly and distinctly: imperatively. Be they important or unimportant, political significations are never more than significations, and political interests are never more than interests.

So the working class did not assume responsibility for figuring forth, in images and symbols, nature and the human, and spontaneity and culture, a task which hitherto had fallen to the partial groups we have already mentioned (women, children, old people, intellectuals). It accepted an ontological materialism which bypassed these questions, a summary and potently systematized philosophy which destroyed both philosophy and the imagination. And so far, all this new and vigorous working class has managed to represent is hard work, production, and technical action on external materials. Nowadays childhood, youth, femininity, even virility no longer have access to symbolism, either on the 'bourgeois' side or in the socialist camp. As for political power, it appears to be above (or below) symbols. Photos and anecdotes about kings, queens, princes and leaders jostle for space on the pages of our newspapers. They are 'images' in a way which is scarcely consonant with the word 'imagination', unless it is understood at its most trivial. We will now attempt to clarify the consequences of all this for art.

What is happening in the semantic field? Certainly there is no shortage of signs, signifiers, signifieds and significations. It is a roaring torrent, a cataract, an ever-more-voluminous Niagara of new significations (facts, 'news', images in the audiovisual sense). The torrent sweeps them all away in its path, submerging them one by one. What is more, it is repetitive. It is always the same old Niagara Falls. The redundancy is enormous. But above all, the field is moving towards
the region of signs and signals, triviality and redundancy, the pure and abstract thing. The field is becoming less and less polarized; consequently its differences, tensions, influxes and currents are getting weaker and weaker. The symbolic pole is beginning to disintegrate, but as yet it has not vanished completely. Images (in the sense of the imaginary) and ‘affective nuclei’ still persist, but there is something disturbing and traumatizing about them compared with the signalling pole, with its clarity and reassuring effectiveness, and its ability to make behaviour patterns adapt to the signals it emits.

In the context of the study of the semantic field, the discussions which have been in the forefront of modern art seem to be based on problems which have been carelessly and undialectically formulated, without an analysis of the ‘formants’ and without a total perspective. Truth to tell, problems like this are carelessly formulated from the outset, because they separate and dissociate the formants of a reality which they render problematical, and which starts disintegrating. The great ‘abstract art–figurative art’ polemic is an example of this. In fact, the ‘good’ work of art has always been expressive, holding hidden meanings which become apparent only with the participation of the spectator (or reader), and can never be completely exhausted. It has always been significative, in that it intentionally uses defined and distinct (and therefore abstract) signs. Expressivity cannot be detached from signification. Michelangelo’s Moses has signifying attributes (the Book of Laws, the halo), but it expresses something which is much more difficult to grasp: paternity, knowledge, power, wisdom, the relation with unknown divinity, old age, and much more besides. Expressivity is inexhaustible – or seems to be, which, aesthetically speaking, boils down to the same thing.

Already the ‘figurative–abstract’ polemic disassembled the formants of the work of art. Already, simply by posing the problem, it brought about a disintegration of art – classical or romantic. By championing abstraction it reduced form to the level of signs, and the construct itself to a thing fashioned by a technique; it ended up producing an entire culture based upon the fetishizing of signs and signification, individual ‘writing’ or ‘graphics’ laid out plastically – technically – on a canvas, without expressivity, and thus without meaning. On an anecdotal level, palpable figures also became reduced to reified significations and groups of signs. This is why so-called ‘figurative’ paintings are no less abstract than so-called abstract ones. Whether the subject be ‘workers’ or historico-political anecdotes, the most important elements are signs and what they signify, that is, abstraction. Abstraction imposes itself because it makes the aesthetic object just one among many in the semantic field, stripping it of a
transcendence which has already been revealed as illusory. It creates a 'world': another reality, securely supported by technicist reality but distinct from it, representing it and appearing to control it. Sadly, when this world becomes a completely pure and plastic 'world' (which is how the illusion is created) it ceases to be a world. No one lives in it any more. Its air is unbreathable. It allows no participation. Some technique or other, some 'thing', briefly catches the interest. It is all a show, and nothing else. Limited to its role as sign, the sign is no longer significant.

Once upon a time, in paintings and sculpture, the female body expressed something. What? Pride in the human race, asserting by its helpless and vulnerable nakedness its victory over all protected and aggressive forms of life. Or again, the destiny of the being which has been vouchsafed sensual pleasure and fecundity, and the insecurity and anxiety consciousness of that destiny inflicts. Or again, the drama of the human being who is now an object (because she is beautiful and desirable, the supreme possession, the palpable truth of life), now a subject (consciousness, and the need to be recognized as such); now a conflict between this objectivity and the demands of subjectivity, and now a mediation, perpetually and repeatedly arbitrating between all these aspects. The female nude expressed (and created) love, and often the more indirectly it did so, in all its carnal purity, the more potent it was. We repeat: what is expressed offers itself and is grasped per se, and at the same time its expressivity is inexhaustible: every time we think we have grasped it we are led to something else, and the process never ends. It is not vague, uncertain, floating; on the contrary, it implies profound determinations which appeal to the senses ('senses' in the plural as organs of sensation and sensibility, and 'sense' in the singular as an orientation of expressivity) but are graspable individually.

In abstract art, the female body becomes a sign, that is to say, an arabesque or a broken line filling a two- or three-dimensional space. What does it signify? An enigma – or maybe it is simply a way of filling a space as decoratively and gracefully as possible. It is a localized perception of the feminine which has lost the undefined resonances of the 'senses'. At the very most, the straight lines and the curves signify themselves in the pictorial or sculptural space they occupy, and nothing more. The sign is nothing but itself, unreservedly, with no background and no ulterior motive, and thus with no depth. It says everything it has to say in one fell swoop. As signs, the straight lines and the curves retain a certain plastic value, and they are similar to signals, that is, abstract things; all they do is stimulate the brief emotive reaction which makes us say: 'Goodness me, it's a woman, I've just
realized it! Precise and fixed signification and the qualities it evokes (precision, plasticity, spatiality) have replaced the obscure profundity of expressivity and its unfolding through time.

In this strange process, at the heart of the total semantic field, an extremely active role is reserved for advertising. Like literature, with which it enjoys a relationship of mutual contempt, advertising lives on images and symbols, and even on myths. It uses them and destroys them by employing images of things as signs to stimulate certain types of behaviour in which the need and desire for these things will be implicit. For modern advertising does not exploit reflexive repetition, but images. Whiteness, the symbol of purity, is used to create the evocative image of soap, washing powder, mineral water, women’s underwear. Woman used to mediate between nature and culture; now she is a retailer-consumer go-between, the supreme commodity and the perfect intermediary for merchandise – like hard cash.

Thus through advertising and the mass media generally symbols become not only signs, but signals as well. They stimulate behaviour patterns and reflex actions: for purchase, rest and relaxation; they stimulate interest in what is happening in the audiovisual field (part of the semantic field), sparking off thrilling little responses which are over almost before they begin. The improvement of the average level of culture in mass culture is being achieved only to the detriment of what culture used to be, by undermining the unity of culture and nature. And this is the main point, the important question. It is only too easy to criticize the mass media and mass communications from the point of view of traditional, sophisticated culture, based on solitary reading (since the invention of printing), meditation, and the leisurely reception of symbols and myths. Such criticism is reactionary, and right-wing. Only revolutionary critique from the Left hits the nail on the head: it is the disjunction between culture and nature, a disjunction which leads to the very conflicts which unite them being eclipsed by the boundless reign of an abstract artificiality posing as naturalness, and a po-faced aestheticism masquerading as art and creativity. This aestheticism is clearly unable to tell the difference between the accumulation of art objects and knowledge about art, and aesthetic activity. It is a vast and complex phenomenon, and its main social support is women (with fashion and improvements in furniture and home decor), who also help to circulate it and act as its agents. Who goes to all the exhibitions, who never misses an art gallery preview, who sees all the new films as soon as they are distributed? In the main, women. This aspect of femininity contains a mixture of highly sophisticated artificiality and pseudo-naturalism, of rather dubious seriousness and indisputable skittishness. Working-
class and proletarian women are only partially outside of this circuit. Unavoidably, mass culture is an aspect of the enigma of modernity which this book is attempting to define (in the face of the snobbery of ‘modernity’, which is bent on glorifying it, now uncritically, now ambiguously masquerading as critique). It has one irredeemable vice. Because of mass culture, by means of mass culture, everything becomes a spectacle, that is, essentially non-participatory. Pure spectacle, television, cinema. I participate by looking; by operations which give me the illusion of participation, but which at the best offer only mystifying identifications and deceptive projections.

Outside of work, the spectacle is the dominant mode through which people relate to each other. It is only through the spectacle that people acquire a (falsified) knowledge of general aspects of social life, from scientific or technological achievements to prevailing types of conduct and orchestrated meetings of international statesmen. The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. It answers perfectly to the needs of a reified and alienated culture.

In its most recent forms – Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*, for example – even the novel can be described as pure spectacle. Poetry is not the only genre that can become ‘ornamental’. No matter how interesting it is, this aspect of spectacle is a dead end for so-called modern art.

At this point radical critique intervenes to open up possibilities and pose precise problems. How can we revive participation, which was kept alive in ages past by the direct influence – emotive, imaginative – of symbolisms and the affective nuclei attached to them? How can we move from generalized spectacle to concrete participation, given that we cannot turn the clock back, and that symbols and myths die along with the beauty they bore and of which they were a part? Is it possible? What are the new categories? Up until now we have defined them only in terms of what they are not. Where will their points of impact be?

We must emphasize that this radical critique will not be limited to ‘content’, but will also deal with form. The ideological or ‘class’ content broadcast by modern culture can be of great political importance, but to limit our questions to that perspective would be to politicize culture at the expense of certain general and specific characteristics particular to our era. Regardless of the political uses made of them or the nature of the economic and social regime which employs them, the mass media are characterized by spectacle as a form. This form comes about as a result of the technology in use and the
predominance of technology *per se* in this domain. It is this general and formal characteristic, in the context of equally generalized technicity and use of technical means, which critique must aim at. Pure spectacle dismantles the forms of art, which hitherto were all created with a view to making the individual *participate* (emotively, affectively, concretely) in works of art and in the ‘world’ they created, in order to bring *externalization* (of men and of nature, of creativity and reception) to an end. Once it becomes externality and spectacle, the aesthetic ‘world’ is a world no more. These ‘cultural phenomena’ have curious implications as yet only partially apparent. Here is one of them. As a symbol, an image and a character, Julien Sorel is as known and as present to us (more so, perhaps) as Stendhal, and Rastignac is as close to us (more so, perhaps) as Balzac. Contemporary writers may be famous, but no one – or virtually no one – remembers their ‘characters’. One exception: Queneau – and this is very flattering for him – is not as famous as Zazie! In the domain of spectacle, fame is the product of success, or vice versa, since the aesthetic ‘world’ is completely subsumed within spectacle, and is given as spectacle. Artistic and literary success is becoming as personalized as political power, and both are ‘personalizations’ which imply a ‘depersonalization’ of listeners and spectators, and even of the authors’ works themselves. Who has not heard of Françoise Sagan? Or of Jean-Paul Sartre? They are household names. But who has read their books? The public knows a few well-crafted quotations. Because there is something memorable about them – ‘Hell is other people’ . . . ‘Women need to be kept on a lead’ – they may well have a certain depth of meaning. The same can be said of film stars, sportsmen, fashion designers and television announcers. They are *images* in the audiovisual sense (a name, a face with recognizable features: a hairstyle, a look, glasses, no glasses . . . ). Constructs and actions are disappearing, but not people; as long as they are there, they are interesting. The vaguest of generalizations emerge from within the chaos of news flashes. Is this progress? Is it a step backwards? That is not the problem. Before we start judging and programming the perspectives, there are several paradoxes we need to confront. The myths of youth, of femininity, of virility – the seducer, the *femme fatale*, the eternal woman, the hero – have not vanished. On the contrary, they are being completely exploited, but as *spectacles*. They have already lost the virtue of participation, except on the inferior level of reflex action (clenching one’s fists during a fight scene, coming out of a Western or an action film feeling like one of the ‘tough guys’). On the other hand, aestheticism is in the ascendant. No one talks of anything else but art, culture, exhibitions, innovations. Do the powers that be imagine that by
changing the creative activity of the past into pure spectacle, and by cataloguing works of art according to name and number, as though they were things, the Museum of the Universe, the Perfect Audiovisual Library and the Complete Film Theatre will ipso facto be beneficial for future creative activity? . . .

When that great 'realist of dreams' Stendhal brought all his analytical insight to bear upon the youth of his time, he formulated the problem most astutely, and viewed the future with optimism. Only young people were capable of taking over existing materials to transform them and be creative. Only they could attempt to resolve the accumulation of contradictions. Only they could defy the rest of the world and move forward towards the possibilities of the future. In 1825, who else was there with sufficient negative power to blaze the hazardous trail of supersession? What they had to refuse was something quite definite: the values and attitudes of the bourgeoisie, embodied in the older generations.

In Stendhal's time, youth myths and the total refusal of life (total nihilism) had not yet arrived on the scene. The myth that only young people are capable of living life to the hilt, without really knowing why, would have blocked his progress, forcing him on to the defensive and into introspective isolation. True, the Revolution and Napoleon had both been defeated, but the defeats had been glorious ones. Therefore the rising generations could not put the blame on their elders or their fathers. These youngsters felt too nostalgic about that glorious age when the bourgeoisie had yet to become bourgeois to start laying responsibility for its more lurid and disgraceful shortcomings at their parents' door. Thus in Stendhal's time older people were not racked by guilty conscience and remorse, or by the morbid fear of being swamped by young people, or the snobbery of the new, or the obsession with anything and everything young people do.

Stendhal did not see his era as something to be endured, like some kind of incurable venereal disease. If he feared that pleasures were becoming increasingly circumscribed, he hoped to find compensation in art. When he wrote Racine and Shakespeare he was preparing to start on his major novels, the work of his mature years. He had not left life behind, certainly, but he was beyond the immediate moment. He did not consider that the autumn of life, with its accumulation of experiences and ideas, was necessarily a misfortune.

Today, if we are to call on young people, will we not first have to smash the youth myth?

As a social group, could 'young people', as they are called, revitalize social life? In other words, could they assume responsibility for the historical mission which the proletariat of the industrialized nations
has hitherto been unable to fulfil? (In the non-industrialized countries, the political role of young people can lead to endless discussions.) There is only one possible answer: no. Any appeal to young people which would grant them such a mission can only be demagogy of the most dangerous sort. It is true that compared with adult society, 'youth' tends to constitute a vast, marginal brotherhood which disregards class differences, fragmented labour and distinctions of competence and power. All well and good. However, the neoromanticism which can result is just as much a caricature of the old romanticism as it is of revolutionary romanticism or the supersession of romanticism. 'Young people' can no more assume the role of a negative force – despite all their protests – than they can fulfil the constructive functions which belong to the proletariat alone. 'Youth', as they are called, no more constitute a class capable of acting qua class than do the partial group known as 'the intellectuals'. It is up to the working class alone to fulfil its mission, and if it fails to do so, then industrial or technicist civilization will become barbaric. Marx's dilemma prevails: socialism or barbarism.

It is nevertheless true, sociologically speaking, that the 'youth' and 'young people' of today constitute a more clearly defined and distinct social group than they did a century ago, and this group has its own specific problems and preoccupations – in other words, it poses problems for society, whatever that society is! The reasons for this are well known: lengthier studies and training periods for productive labour, and the difficulties of training in a wider sense – practical, ethical – in an increasingly complex society. And in this context, we must not forget military service.

In a way which sometimes appears to contradict these difficulties, young people can master significant sectors of everyday life swiftly and precociously: they can pick up technical skills quickly, and can be resourceful where day-to-day living is concerned. It is this contradiction which gives birth to the problem.

Generally, descriptions of this social group appear distorted by prejudice (friendly or unfriendly), advertising, and demagogic and political interests. Because it is difficult to distinguish between value judgements and balanced observations, the latter are all the more easily twisted by the former. Anyone who aims specifically at a 'young' clientele is accused of flattering them; those who take moral and censorious attitudes are accused of undervaluing them. The truth – or, to put it more circumspectly, an approximation of the real situation – very probably lies somewhere between the two.

Were a knowledgeable, prudent and objective sociologist to attempt a survey of French 'youth' today, the result would probably be
rather colourless and bland. His conclusions might go something like this: ‘The adolescent or young man of 1961 is not a boy scout and he is not a thug. What is paradoxical and worrying about him is that he seems the opposite of the young adult, that is, someone precociously endowed with qualities generally attributed to maturity and manhood. Our young man takes the kind of demands Gide made several decades ago and exaggerates them to an absurd degree: open-mindedness, gratuitous and undetermined acts, scepticism. In the past these were seen as vices, but now they are virtues; for Gide they were aesthetic considerations, now they are put into practice. Given this new context, they take on a new meaning. Gide would probably disown it all if he could see it! Nothing can surprise this young man, and he has no difficulty in curbing his curiosity. Above all he fears being duped, so his actions and relations are characterized by a fundamental mistrust. Furthermore, he has heard so much talk about technological and scientific progress that he takes the most stupendous innovations for granted, and inventions and achievements strike him as just normal and natural. And while this does not stop him from prognosticating the worst consequences, he is skilled at parenthesizing them in order to avoid thinking about them. Time will tell. This boy – or this girl – is a realist, happy to play the waiting game. He (or she) is unenthusiastic and unresponsive, somewhat selfish, and unwilling to commit himself beyond the present moment. On the other hand, as a realist, he is more than capable of facing up to things (immediate, given things), distinguishing between what he will find possible or impossible, and assessing the difficulties any particular task may involve. He looks at the things around him, and the people. They are what they are, no more, no less. That is the supreme rule of wisdom. He thinks that anyone who wants to change the world must be slightly unhinged. To say that these young people are a bit short on ideals would be putting it mildly. They tend to believe that “ideals” fool people and are deliberately used to fool people, that ideals are a hypocritical front for unscrupulous manipulation. This wariness is only too justified – how can we blame them for it? The young man (or woman) is highly adaptable. He is good at weighing up the situation, because he has certain precise and pressing needs, each with its allotted place and time: holidays, pocket money, Vespas, films, record players, girlfriends (or boyfriends), and later, a bed-sit, a car. His life is programmed. In his opinion, society owes it to him to satisfy these needs, but if he has to work, he will, and hard. The only thing which will make him feel aggrieved is not being paid enough. As a consequence of all this he keeps his eyes open and knows what he is doing: he is calculating. But in spite of these perpetual calculations, no one
could accuse him of insincerity; he does not try to be other than what he is, and says as much. He thinks rebellion is stupid, but that does not stop him from deeply despising society as it is, as well as his elders, and previous generations. This society has made him what he is, and he does not particularly like the end-product. If he thinks that the ends justify the means – any means, the roughest and the dirtiest – it is because that is how his parents and elders have made ends meet. He has learned the game from the society around him. How can we blame him for playing it on his own terms and using it as a weapon against life’s winners? Sometimes he seems tempted to turn against this society, with its unbridled *arrivisme*, free-loading and rule-bending. Sometimes it is almost as if he regrets having nothing to love, nothing to look up to, nothing to place his trust in. But that’s how things are. That’s how he is, since that’s how things are and that’s how people are. This boy (or girl) is completely free and open-minded. He is not a bad character, he is not a good character; he has simply no character at all. He would not understand what having character might mean, and would not want to. He thinks people with character are either idiots or just plain gullible. This disappearance of *character* in the classical sense of the term is not simply a literary or philosophical phenomenon, it is a sociological fact. Character has disappeared from literature, as it has from society. It has become out-of-date. The last surviving “character” trait was respectability, the respectability of bourgeois self-importance. Its dying days were played out as a farce. Thus our boy (or girl) would appear to be free in the Sartrean rather than the Gidean sense. If this gives Sartre’s limited but penetrating theories something of a boost, Sartre himself can hardly be proud of the fact. Freedom in the “existentialist” sense, or what passes for it, has been realized in the young people of today, it has found its meaning among them – that is to say, it has lost any meaning it ever had in the first place. The boy (or girl) of 1961 is “freely” capable of the best and the worst, according to circumstances. He is not a boy scout, he is not a thug, but circumstances can turn him into a hero or a gangster. He has no spontaneity or willpower in the “classic” psychological meaning of the terms, no preconceived ideas, no value judgements. His judgements of things and people are always precise, and he immediately generalizes them into categories without bothering to give it another thought. . . .

This somewhat grey sociological fresco has attempted to portray an average rather than exceptional type, boys and girls no better or no worse than the young people of twenty, thirty or fifty years ago, young people of their time. They seem to have resolved, or at least alleviated, some hitherto painful problems – the problem of sex, for example.
But our picture lacks one important element: we need a few strokes of vivid colour in the middle. For in the centre of it all are a few exceptional individuals and groups who stand out brightly against the prevailing monochrome.

For there are young people who value their youth and live it as a kind of quest. Every older person knows one or two of them. But what exactly do they represent? The question begs a whole string of others. What are they hoping to find? What do they want? What will they do? Will they become writers, spokesmen, activists? Are they star witnesses? For the prosecution? Will they be radical or prudent in what they reject? Will they always be different from everyone else? What are their real problems, the problems they admit to, the problems they hide?

They exist, and that in itself is extremely important. In the thirty years between 1930 and 1960, the avant-garde virtually disappeared. Intellectuals were ideologically and politically subordinated, and relegated to playing secondary roles. They were shut up in ghettos and brainwashed by both democratic and authoritarian means. But now, worldwide, avant-gardes are forming again, and making their voices heard. It is an observable fact. But what is happening in these often minuscule little groups? Are they all composed of ‘angry young men’? In France, and elsewhere, do they mean that the ‘beat generation’ has arrived? Are they ‘hooligans’? How many of them are there? Not many. Mostly boys. Hardly any girls (and what girls there are just hunt with the pack, get their sexual kicks with the winners – or try to – and follow them on the road to success; they want to seize every opportunity and, using the limited means at their disposal, make the best of the situation. We have to admit this, but with some regret. We must not be too hard on them, for who can blame them?). These boys exist. They sense that things are not running smoothly, but they do not particularly want them to. They hate circles – circles are all vicious; and they hate cycles – they are all traps. They blame things and people for being what they are. They love pleasure and detest cynicism, even when it is just affectation. They are no enemies of sensuality, and they hate sensualists. They are perfectly convinced that we are all caught up in a gigantic stupidity, a colossal, dreary, pedantic ugliness which stands victorious over the corpses of spontaneity, taste and lucidity. In their opinion, art, literature, and particularly the so-called critics, have only one function (which they carry out only too well): to replace pleasure with chatter, and to substitute the total life with a caricature of itself.

There are few men or constructs that these young people come out in favour of, and there are many they are against. There is no reason
for them to prefer socialist moralism (known, rightly or wrongly, as ‘proletarian’) to capitalist immoralism, or the decent, ugly mediocrity of the Eastern bloc countries to the ostentatious death throes of the bourgeoisie. They do not opt between the aestheticism of one ‘camp’ and the anti-aestheticism of the other. They do not think that man was meant for labour, or for pleasure, but for both; but first and foremost they think he was meant to know his own humanity, to recognize himself, and to recognize others in a reciprocal praxis. Certainly, they lack that virtue which Stendhal attributed to the young people in whom he had placed his hopes, and which was for him a complete definition of romanticism: the virtue of putting pleasure before vanity (pleasure, or joy, and, if need be, thought).

What more can we say about them? That they refuse to choose between enforced labour and freely accepted idleness, between parasitism and top-heavy bureaucracy; that they refuse to accept the ‘world of respect’, at a time and in a country where everyone, from the priest to the permanent politician, from the whoremaster to the mandarin, from the torturer to the victim, is becoming respectable, respectful and respected; that they are against conformism of all kinds, bourgeois conformism and the other one, but that does not prevent them from valuing a certain type of self-respect (which they do not inevitably find comical) or a certain kind of rigour; that they live as best they can given that, refusing as they do to opt between impotence and power, between success and failure, their lives are dominated by a refusal to choose.

Ah! and something else, and it is important not to forget it: these living paradoxes do not subscribe to anything – or few of them do, even though they know full well that nowadays it is essential to do so (to a political party or creed, and if not, to a ‘world-view’, or at least to a strategy). Just about all of them are ‘left-wing’. Many are Communists; whether they belong to the Party or not, they make no secret of their contempt for the official ideology of the Communist Parties, for their summary philosophism and their immoralist moralism. Instinctively they have rediscovered the hard truth Stendhal found so difficult to learn: one should beware of feeling admiration. And in this these young men are of their time, and their absolute critical attitude is shared throughout their whole generation. In a word, they live as happy as sandboys, surrounded by contradictions so acute that they would try the strongest of minds and nerves.

Is all this still too vague, not bright enough to stand out against the prevailing monochrome? Then here are a few more details.

Some of them are more concerned with finding a lifestyle than with constructs. They are prejudiced against anything which does not pave
the way for a new lifestyle, and will reject it. But this does not mean that they are backtracking towards the old philosophies of life which opposed reason and knowledge; rather, they are continuing what they perceive as the revolutionary aspects of Surrealism, while rejecting its aesthetic. Thus, in their judgement, art has had its day and is being subsumed in ways of living, of loving, of playing and of working – in ways of action. They believe that the ‘world of expressivity’ as a separate ‘world’ is at an end, or soon will be. Theirs is an absolute critique with which so-called socialist art finds no favour. They take ‘modernity’ as a whole to task for having changed and for continuing to change the world into pure spectacle, impure and appalling. And what is their programme? Their unique proposition is that ‘the only reason men have for living is to construct their own lives’, so that once freed from basic needs, men will begin to have desires – needs transformed and recognized as such via the rejection of ways of behaviour dictated by others. Thus they will find fulfilment in situations of their own making, in a process of continual reinvention. This programme brings together in a single ensemble the working-class struggle in all its forms and on all its levels, and all the protests, indifferences and demands implicit in the extreme behaviour of young people and of artists. In this view, this ‘basis for demands’ involves the invention and practical testing of a utopianism. They see utopianism as a legitimate historical moment, one which initiates the formation of desires and their projection, and begins the dismantling of the ideologies of separate ‘worlds’ and of an impoverished and totally ‘private’ (i.e. deprived of ‘totality’) everyday life.

They insist that the content of the revolutionary movement is the totality of society’s problems, and that this content must be tested practically. This can be done only by addressing the problems of ‘revolutionary microsocieties’ – that is, groups, not isolated individuals – which ask questions about style, and endeavour to solve them.

The construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle... The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors. The role played by the passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.76

When the ‘Situationists’ have constructs in mind, it is towns they are thinking of, in so far as a town is a place with a way of living which demands participation and encompasses spectacle, while being irreducible to it. A town creates situations; and it is within the context of the urban milieu that the creative activity of situations, and thus of a
style and a way of living, is best undertaken. Thus the group has con­
centrated its attention on describing towns, on urban space and its use
for play, and on all the forms of participation which derive from it. To
summarize: the most brilliant Situationists are exploring and testing
out a kind of lived utopianism, by seeking a consciousness and a con­
structive activity which will be disalienating, in contradistinction to the
alienated structures and alienating situations which are rife within
‘modernity’.

Another group, which (in 1960) calls itself ‘The General Line’, is
quietly biding its time, never publishing anything, amorphous,
unorganized, but with a large membership; this group has an unqual­
ified confidence in the future of socialism and of the USSR. As a
result, its critique of official cultural attitudes in the USSR and in the
Communist movement generally – where obdurate sectarianism
disguises extremes of opportunism and powerlessness – could scarcely
be deemed lenient. Its young members simply want to infer the
consequences of a historical necessity: in their view the USSR will
inevitably overcome the backwardness of its culture compared with its
economic growth, and will renew the cultural revolution which
Stalinism halted and reduced to ‘the elimination of illiteracy’ and to
 technological culture. They expect the USSR to create the twentieth­
century Renaissance. This Renaissance would be characterized – and
heralded – by the renewal of revolutionary romanticism. As a conse­
quence, they are attempting to use this possibility to establish a tactic,
a strategy, and finally, a programme, for they too think ‘program­
 matically’ – or, to use terminology currently in vogue, prospectively.
Consequently, their critique of bourgeois culture and thought is all
the more radical and virulent, and this is the clearest aspect of their
theories. In their view, bourgeois culture shows the symptoms of its
bankruptcy in two ways: on the one hand it fetishizes technical
objects and turns comfort into a cult (which has nothing ‘cultured’
about it); on the other it constitutes a superstructure made up of an
accumulation of semiconscious, reified and complacent alienations.
It is this complacency which forms the main target of their critique:
the complacency of people who every day, every week and every
month try to pretend that lots of interesting things are happening –
the complacency (and self-justification) of people who make believe
that culture is constantly renewing itself, and that the new books
which come out by the dozen, the new films, the prizes, the exhibitions,
all this perpetually ‘interesting’ and ‘important’ ‘production’, are
the equivalent of a life. Listen to what one of these young people said
in a letter he wrote to me personally:
All this takes place in a whirlwind of agitation and confusion. First Mr So-and-so is important, then Mr Such-and-such, then Mr X, then Mr Y, and then Mr X's last work becomes important, and nobody talks about Mr Y any more. It's just a game of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' - everyone knows everyone else, everyone lives according to stereotypes, whether they are on the Left or on the Right; everyone busies themselves in the same way, gives interviews in the same way, reads the same books, sees the same films, passes the same contradictory judgements with the same self-assurance, the same lack of rigour, the same conformism, the same deference to friends who tomorrow will be equally deferential in return. . . . And so it goes! Everything appears to be on the march! The palpable universe is being explored! Every month the world of film is turned upside down! The world of the theatre will never be the same again! As regularly as clockwork the world of the novel is constructed, deconstructed, then reconstructed all over again! Pile upon pile of significant works appear which nobody talks about a month or a year later. This artist is admired, that one rakes in the cash, and vice versa - they are all at it, scrambling up the cultural ladder. All this is a front for the most important fact: in France there is no culture any more, not even a bourgeois culture: there's just form, an empty shell, pure writing. There is freedom still, but in our plutocracy, with all its liberal tendencies, revolutionary traditions and highly profitable cultural capital, there is no line, no path for that freedom to take. . . . What would happen if more people read Marc Bloch instead of A Children's Guide to French History; if they went to see Come Back Africa instead of Les Tricheurs; if they preferred Malcolm Lowry to Robbe-Grillet and Uccello to Hartung? . . . But people are comfortable as they are, and comfortably off too. A little war or two, so what? They assimilate things, then spit them out. . . . There is never a book which attempts simply to describe the world precisely, and to go beyond its complexities to give a picture of it which would be complete and stripped of complexes. Psychology, and more psychology. No effort to move from the particular to the general. . . .

But enough of this naive indictment. There are other young men, less angry, with more discretion and more conciseness, who are joining forces to make a reasoned exploration of the conditions which might be created by unlimited industrial development and technicity. Their method - utopian but rational - is to use science fiction as a means of looking forward towards what may be possible. We have already noted the curious way such explorations of time and space revive metaphysical themes (including that almost Spinozist hypothesis of an infinite Mind planning the entire universe, and not simply our own little 'world'). So with some audacity these young men are following the
path laid down by cybernetics, and they believe that it will reveal a future in which technicity and the ‘world’ of technical objects will be taken to their ultimate conclusions, and so kept under control at last.  

And there is yet another little group which, quietly and unassuming­ly, is attempting to reconstitute the human conditions requisite for ‘authenticity’: friendship, comradeship, transparency in love relationships. This ethical exploration involves a rather apposite attack upon accepted moral values . . .

Be they active or non-active, violent or clandestine, all these groups are disputing the right of politicians, philosophers or artists to be in charge of what is possible. They all imply a philosophy of the possible, which would not be a philosophy in the classic meaning of the term (a system, a ‘world-view’, an ontology, or speculative thought), but would take as its point of departure a lived, empirical investigation. It would not ignore the abstract concept of the possible and its relations with the real and the here-and-now; indeed, it would use it to describe and analyse situations. But ultimately, this concept would be left to one side. These young people are testing out what may be possible, and what may be impossible. They are all in search of the opening, by which they may enter in a practical way into the ‘possible–impossible’ dialectic, which in turn implies other dialectics: ‘foreseen–unforeseen’, ‘necessary–aleatory’, ‘seriousness–play’, ‘revolution–conservatism’, or even, in the widest sense, ‘Right–Left’.

Questions from a reader

(We have the God-given right to create this reader. We’ll be logical and call him Mr A. So there, he’s created. He is getting to his feet. He is going to ask unpredictable questions, he will have his moods, get angry, agree with me or not, as the case may be. As for the author, equally logically, he will abandon the conventional ‘we’ and call himself Mr B. He too will ask unpredictable questions, reply to Mr A, lose his temper – in a word, enjoy himself.)

Mr A: But come now, dear Mr B, what are you driving at? I find it hard to follow you. If I’ve understood it correctly, you say there is to be a new romanticism, a revolutionary romanticism, a movement or an aspiration of some sort. And then you seem to veer off in another direction. Romanticism, or a romanticism, is an aesthetic theory, an artistic or literary avant-garde. But you seem to cast doubts as to whether art has any future. Do you think that the young people you have described will revitalize art, or will they bury it? Could you be more explicit about what future you think art has?
Mr B (very polite, almost pedantic): Mr A, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for asking such an interesting question. Indeed, it gives me the opportunity to explain a few of my ideas more succinctly. . . . Ideas is perhaps not quite the word – let us say ‘opinions’, or even ‘hypotheses’. Should you disagree with what I have to say, let me remind you that I don’t hold dogmatic views about anything. Above all, I want a dialogue. In effect, I do believe that art will die. During our intellectual stroll together, I have given you a few reasons why. There are a great many more. If you would allow me to speak my mind on the matter, I will go so far as to state that art is already dead.

Mr A: Oh! How can you say such a thing! What a paradox, and what an old one at that! Every five minutes someone or other announces the end of art with a capital A. And yet art still goes on . . . .

Mr B: I know, I know. Artistic production is blooming, it’s positively bursting out all over. There are many great painters, a few great poets and writers, music is forging ahead in its own audacious way. . . . Well, this is how I see it: all this production (and not to mention the countless re-productions), all this prevailing aestheticism which so many cultivated people use to justify their interest in art, is nothing more than the form art is taking in order to wither away and die.

Mr A (fidgeting, ill-at-ease): Obviously, you must be one of those people who are against modern culture, popularized or popular culture, mass culture, put it how you like. You are unhappy that cultural and cultivated milieux should be opened out. For art to cease as the privilege of an aristocracy or a ruling class and to reach wider social strata, and for artists and amateurs to make more direct contact with each other – you think this is vulgarization, a lowering of standards, compromise. It’s not art any more!

Mr B: Excuse me! Please don’t put words into my mouth. If a worker listens to a Brandenburg Concerto on the radio, or watches a good classical play on TV, or hangs a Van Gogh reproduction on his wall – well, fine! There are plenty of indications that the average level of culture is rising, that average taste is getting more sophisticated, and that people generally are becoming more intelligent. I won’t go into the inevitable cultural saturation this entails. My question concerns creative activity, and the point we have reached in the history of art. In my opinion, when I look at so-called modern works and try to analyse them – and I’m talking about the ‘best’ stuff – well, it’s not exactly art any more. It’s already something else.
Mr A: Another paradox, my dear fellow. Or simply a question of words. An intellectual conjuring trick. Sleight of hand. It doesn’t mean anything.

Mr B: Please, let us consider a few facts together – or reconsider them, since possibly we have already encountered them. Isn’t it true that our most brilliantly gifted beginners all start by writing antipoems or apoems, antiplays or pseudo-novels? Yes or no? And then they get older, start hankering after success, and soon they’re writing classical plays, poems which rhyme, in Alexandrines even, and good, solid, well-crafted novels. And it’s been like that for the last forty years, ever since Dada and Surrealism. There’s no point in my quoting names. What a long and illustrious list it would be. . . . Now, does that make any sense to you?

Mr A: All it proves is that in literature and art, as in love, youth and seriousness are incompatible.

Mr B: So becoming classical is part of the ageing process. In the words of Victor Hugo: ‘In her old age every tart becomes a prude’. Well, my dear sir, what you have said is hardly flattering for neoclassicism! . . . But let me go on with my indictment. Literature? Increasingly it is nothing more than a bag of verbal tricks and compositional devices. When our friend Jean Duvignaud said in his book *Pour entrer dans le XXe siècle* that literature should accept the challenge of industrial civilization, he noted a fact: that for the moment it was incapable of doing so. I think this inability is permanent. Consider the writings of the new novelists who are so much in the news – how arid they are. In a Robbe-Grillet novel, there are no symbols any more, just objects and their significations; there’s no expressivity any more, and no meaning; everything is stripped down to its bare bones. It’s fascinating, but unbearable; novels are becoming like summaries. What have the best prose works in the last ten years been? Autobiographies. That genre uses summaries, but at least they are given a bit of flesh and blood; autobiographies narrate real experiences, real initiations into life. Novels don’t do that any more.

Mr A: But a lot of people read these novels.

Mr B: Because they’re interesting.

Mr A: What more do you want?
Mr B: Nothing at all, really. I like detective books – Agatha Christie or Simenon, especially Simenon – I find them very interesting indeed. But you can’t put them in the same category as the works of Stendhal. And that’s that.

Mr A: You are just playing with words.

Mr B: Yes, but those words designate ideas and concepts – art, for example.

Mr A: Now we’re back to those hoary old arguments about art for art’s sake! They’re not only out of date, they’re positively antediluvian!

Mr B: Don’t try to dodge the issue. I intend to keep Stendhal as my point of reference. Stendhal was not concerned with art for art’s sake. It was a theory he knew nothing about, and had he known about it he would have thought it pedantic. He believed in beauty, as the promise of happiness, and in art for pleasure, as a preparation for love, a remembrance of love, a fiction of love interwoven with life.

Mr A: Ah! I see what you’re driving at! You are against the reconsideration of old concepts, aesthetic concepts included, and against remoulding them in terms of a universal culture which would bring together all the forms of art that have ever existed in the world. You think and judge like a philosopher – and one philosopher in particular. You agree with Hegel. Art must die, and beauty too. There is nothing eternal or immortal about it, since Absolute Spirit alone is eternal, and everything else is transitory.

Mr B (pondering): Do I agree with Hegel? Yes and no. Yes, beauty dies; it comes to an end, because it is finite, like every construct, like everything which is born and has life, like everything which comes into being in history. And once the idea of beauty has gone stale, what remains of art? When Surrealism tried to revitalize it, making it distorted and stilted in the process, it had already abandoned its fundamental task, which had been to find a poetic lifestyle. To reanimate the corpse of beauty: that was a task worth trying. Surrealism failed. Yes, I agree with Hegel: art must give way to higher forms of praxis and consciousness. And yet I don’t agree. No, it was not death which triumphed in those strange, poetic voices. The death of art is not the triumph of death, or one of its triumphs. The death of art is a history, the history of the exhaustion of a form and its content, of their inner life and their supersession.
Mr A (becoming impatient): But what about abstract painting? And concrete music?

Mr B: Thank you for bringing them up in a single question. Indeed, they have characteristics in common: image-as-sign, sound-as-sign, sound-as-thing.

Mr A: And you don’t think anything of them?

Mr B: Oh, but I do! It’s all very pleasant, interesting, fascinating even. It’s well crafted. I love finding out how it’s done; and there are lots of learned commentaries which help me to do that almost single-handed. Their logical conclusions: a picture in monochrome, but still open to learned exegesis; and a series of blocks of sounds, or timbres, or resonant objects.

Mr A: In other words, as far as you’re concerned, there are no ‘valid’ works any more.

Mr B: Oh yes there are! Whenever that old wizard Picasso unearths the old Mediterranean myths and the old symbols – the goat, the bull, the satyr, the sea, the mountains – he almost manages to bring beauty back to life again. I would say the same about Lowry, who constructed his *Under the Volcano* using cabbalistic symbols. And you’d like me to cite a valid work of art nearer our times? What about a film – *Hiroshima mon amour* . . . ?

Mr A: And so? In what way is it ‘valid’?

Mr B: I more or less agree with what my Situationist friends wrote about it. Excuse me for a second, I’ll just go and find the book . . . . Here’s what they say about the film: ‘The appearance in commercial cinema of the self-destructive movement which dominates the whole of modern art . . . The cinematic follow-up of the movement which led all writing, beginning with poetry, towards dissolution . . . . Inevitably memory is the theme which signifies the appearance of the phase in which an art conducts its own internal critique.’ That last remark strikes me as profoundly accurate: an art which wants to be pure creativity and yet wants to create something vital at the same time will soon turn its back on abstract signs and look to the past, memory, time gone by. Think of time as a totality – that’s Joyce and Proust; think of it as the fragmentation of instants – that’s Faulkner. Here are a few more lines from the same text: ‘The fundamental
characteristic of modern spectacle is that it stages its own ruin.' Art
does not die an ontological or a metaphysical death, as Hegel
thought, and Nietzsche after him. It dies like a human being, killed by
being externalized. Its death is a social one. In times gone by, beauty
was like an order; what I mean is that it made commands via express-
vivity, or that its expressivity imposed a participation. It commanded
people to enter into its order. How strong beauty was, and how gently
persuasive! How deep were the desire and the respect it inspired!
And there was nothing moral about its order. But now that art has
become pure spectacle, pure separation, there is just one thing left for
it to do: disappear. It has already done so, in aestheticism. Already its
themes have no connection with art any more: memory, remem-
brance of things past, inventories, lists, summaries of exhausted lives,
autobiographies, the sign in all its externality, pure glance, pure spec-
tacle, a trial without verdict and without end because there is no
supreme judge or last judgement, save atomic annihilation. . . .

Mr A (uneasy, but mocking): And so your best scenario is that if
humanity survives, it will do so in an industrial, technicist, rational
society, without art?

Mr B: Exactly.

Mr A: Well, that’s certainly not going to be much fun!

Mr B: My dear chap, everyone is bored already. I mustn’t exagge-
rate – nor bored to death, nor bored to death with not dying, as a
mystic might say – or a nihilist, which is the same thing. People are
more bored in advanced countries like the USA and Sweden than
they are in Africa or Yugoslavia, or even in this dear old France of
ours. Don’t let’s mention the Soviets or the Chinese, they haven’t
time to get bored, to get bored you need leisure. Those good people
are workers, they produce; they are told that production is synony-
mous with satisfaction. Maybe they believe it is. If so, so much the
better for them, so much the worse for us. Even so, they have some
fairly pressing needs, but they go on waiting; they get less bored than
we do. In my opinion it is modern boredom which poses the problem
of style in life.

Mr A: But exactly, a social life without art and a society without aes-
thetic expressivity are inconceivable!

Mr B: I have noticed that even at its most intense and most refined,
aestheticism is still no barrier against boredom. It is more like a cultural veil to hide it from view, if I can put it like that.

**Mr A:** So dozens of centuries of art will just have been useless? The people of the future will be content with science and technology? Yet you say you are attempting a radical critique of modernity (as you call it) in order to purge it of its platitudes.

**Mr B:** Excuse me, excuse me. Don’t jump to conclusions. I’m talking about art as a specialized activity, carried out by individuals who devote themselves to the production of constructs which are above life, while others manage only to stay alive because they devote themselves to abstract or fragmented labour. Yes, my dear sir, I think that in so far as it is a specialized activity, art was born historically and will disappear, like philosophy, like politics and the state, those illusory, superfluous and externalized excrescences which produce only externality. Moreover, I think that art is already disappearing as a result of aestheticism and culturalism, just as ideologies are being killed off by overuse, philosophy by philosophism, and politics by the glorification of the state. This is the way realities are accomplished; they accomplish their own destinies; it is when they become a fully extended, ‘worldwide’ totality that they meet their end. Aestheticism, art as fashion and art as fetish have made us forget that there is an aesthetic alienation just as there is a speculative or political alienation. It’s a strange thing, but there is an alienation which modernity has exploited to such a degree that people have forgotten all about it: life as an illusion reflected in art.

**Mr A:** I don’t understand you. . . . Or rather, I understand you only too well. Everything will perish, according to you – art, the state, philosophy and, of course, religion. Everything that was ever great, anything that men ever strove towards with their strength and their intellect, everything they have made sacrifices for, everything by which they hoped to supersede themselves, you want to obliterate with one stroke of your pen.

**Mr B:** My dear chap, you’re waxing grandiloquent, and getting rattty as well. A bad sign, on both accounts. Listen to me. Marx wrote that the real individual man will absorb the abstract man; in his life and in his real relations, he will become truly human when he has ‘recognized that his own strengths’ lie in his social strengths, and has stopped keeping them separate. Everyone knows the texts, so I won’t insult you by quoting chapter and verse. The true content of these
texts, and of several others, is frequently misunderstood. In my view they mean that philosophy, art and politics (let’s put religion to one side, for it is self-evident), in so far as they are specialized activities, and external to everyday life, must disappear to make way for the possibility of the ‘real appropriation’ of man by man, man’s appropriation of nature and of his own nature, the return of the human to itself with all ‘the wealth of development’ which would thus become reinvested in everyday practice. Once constituted as such, but exhausted and rejected as such, the externalized and alienated forces would become real powers again, reabsorbed along with their accumulated riches into the heart of that impoverished, ambiguous and deprived area we know as everyday life.

Mr A: Pooh! Does any of that have any concrete meaning?

Mr B: Concrete? I don’t like that word any more. It is used to cover up the worst kind of abstractions, those which crowd in on the immediate moment and block one’s view rather than illuminating the horizon. Marx thought that one day men will live out their everyday lives practically, rediscovering in the process something which perhaps had been accomplished by some societies now lost; they will grasp the physical world with cultivated eyes, and love with senses formed by the art of living, instead of having to refer to objects and works of art. If life is to become the art of living, art must die and be reborn in life.

Mr A: Everyone a poet, and no more poems or poetry! Everyone a painter and no more paintings! Everyone an artist, and no more art! . . . How utopian can you get!

Mr B: Hey! Who said anything to the contrary? According to Marx’s most profound ideas, philosophy becomes resolved in praxis and utopianism, that is, in the study of social praxis and the study of possibilities respectively, with the one illuminating the other. This is why, in the pages you have been patient enough to read, so much space has been devoted to romantic utopianism, to romanticism as a way of living, and to utopian socialism, that sotto voce accompaniment to romantic literature. Perhaps it was wrong of me not to warn you. But I knew very well where I was leading you, my dear fellow, even if you did not. Utopianism? Nowadays we must find out what it means all over again. It is a contemporary preoccupation. Why? The reason is obvious. It was once believed that the future could be rationally deduced and predicted from an examination of the present, and that the predictive operations of the natural sciences could be applied to
society; this rationality has gone bankrupt. Absolute determinisms in economics, history, sociology and politics have all let us down. The aleatory and the unpredictable – and therefore the possible – are becoming part of knowledge as well as of life. The cumulative processes – technology, knowledge – are always producing new situations, and because they are new they are unpredictable, and remain so even if we can understand them with hindsight. Thus there is nothing absolute about the aleatory. And the world revolution? Forty years of rather unsuccessful history in France and Europe prove nothing at all. The world revolution is still under way. Yes sir! It is. And we have no right to abandon its perspectives. It is under way, just as Marx said, but along different lines to the ones he and Lenin predicted. The backward countries will catch up with the advanced countries and overtake them – that is the process under way. The advanced countries are lagging behind their own possibilities, and because their sense of 'the real' has not changed, except superficially, it is becoming less able to satisfy those who ought to be happy with it, but cannot. Utopianism lives again. It is acting out its old role: to disappoint, but also to stimulate. It is exploring the possibilities of a praxis which is failing to realize them itself and leaves us unfulfilled because those possibilities are there waiting for us and calling to us. Imagination is adopting or rediscovering a creative power. It is pooling its forces with an obscurely rediscovered spontaneity. And this is perhaps why – or where – classicism becomes completely meaningless. Because it relies on an idea of beauty achieved, or an idea of the absolute, or of perfection, its symbols and images are never used to explore what is possible and to prefigure the transition from the possible to the real. During a heated discussion, a student of mine once said that Racine allows no place in his works for the realization of love – the love between Titus and Bérénice, for example. For Racine, love is a mythic absolute, a possibility realized in eternity. He has no time for impossibility, and that is the basis of classicism. Titus is perfect, Bérénice is perfect, so is Antiochus. Titus's love for Bérénice is perfect, as is hers for him, and as is their friendship with Antiochus. Love and friendship are perfect, absolute, achieved. The only conflict is between absolute love and absolute power, not between the possible and the impossible. As for the old romanticism, its object is no longer the possible, but the impossible; the conscious, sought-for realization of love and beauty and good, and the insurmountable obstacles they encounter. Ever-present, the possible turns into melancholy, nostalgia, a resigned relativism. The question at the heart of de Musset's Lorenzaccio is the problem of the transition from the possible to the real. It remains unresolved. Man is nothing unless he can make a
reality of what he has glimpsed in his youth, and this is impossible. Well, here are my thoughts on the matter. Nowadays dreams, imagination and utopianism are exploring the dialectic between the possible and the impossible, and this is how we are superseding classicism and romanticism, while remaining closer to the latter than to the former. But be careful, I want to make myself quite clear: the new utopianism we can see developing all around us really is new. Utopianism is testing itself out; it is living itself; imagination is becoming a lived experience, something experimental; instead of combating or repressing rationality, it is incorporating it. Only a kind of reasoned but dialectical use of utopianism will permit us to illuminate the present in the name of the future, to criticize what has been accomplished, to criticize bourgeois or socialist everyday life; and that, according to the greatest nonconformist thinkers, is a basic element in revolutionary thought. Only this dialectical use of utopianism as a method will allow us to programme our thought and our lives, and to retain a critical consciousness amid all this mixture of overblown aestheticism, art in decline, ideologism, 'de-ideologization' (as sociologists call it), philosophism, the death of philosophy or the philosophy of death. The possible has ceased to be abstract, don't you see, and that is why we (you and I) are superseding both philosophy and art. And note that it is no longer a question of one leap into the distant future over the head of the present and the near future, but of exploring the possible using the present as a starting point. You should also note that the possible and the utopian method can no longer be synonymous with foresight, prophecy, adventurism or the vague consciousness of the future. We can no longer see utopianism as an abstract principle, like hope, projection, willpower or goodwill, 'prescience', 'values', or axiology (some of these words are not even in the French language!); and it strikes me that the philosophers who see utopianism in this way are lagging behind what is possible and the idea of what is possible. And that is why I attach so much importance to new towns and their problems.

Mr A: Please, get your breath back... Basically, if I understand you correctly, you are saying that this is why you also attach such importance to style in life – more importance than to constructs.

Mr B: Exactly! More importance to style in life than to constructs! I would go so far as to maintain that the lifestyles of our most illustrious contemporaries are more significant than their works. Works become forgotten, success fades: novels, essays and poems are linked only through and in the author’s lifestyle which, consciously or not,
appears behind the image of the famous person like a watermark. Would you like some examples? Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. They have a way of loving and living which they have talked about (or not talked about, as the case may be) in their works, and which many people find intriguing. The way Aragon and Triolet have amplified and magnified their relationship via aesthetic and political transpositions is quite moving; however, they are a touch pompous and literary for my taste. Sartre and Beauvoir have lived out an experiment in transparent relationships and a mutual recognition in freedom, but also in separation. The essential thing is lifestyle, which is much more important than its fictionalization, where the couples themselves become unrecognizable. Their lifestyle will survive their constructs. The lifestyle is the construct. And that is what they will be judged by.

Mr A: Dubious! Most dubious! But let's leave that for the moment. . . . Are you not afraid that in this wonderful utopia of the future these chappies of yours may not sink to the level of gross satisfaction?

Mr B: If these chappies, as you so amiably call them, find satisfaction, that will already be something. However, unlike my friend François Châtelet, whose researches have run parallel to mine, I believe in the creative powers of human dissatisfaction: a dialectic of 'satisfaction-dissatisfaction', a process of supersession which will end only when the human race does – another aspect of the 'possible-impossible' dialectic.

Mr A (growing impatient): But where will this process of supersession begin? When? How? In industrial society? In technicist society? On a world scale once worldwide industrialization is achieved?

Mr B: How can you affirm that there will be one industrial society, with only quantitative and insignificant variants due to uneven degrees of industrialization or localized historical incidents? How can you know that there will be one technicist civilization, and only one? Your concepts seem clear, but they're not, and I advise you not to exploit them in such dubious extrapolations! My dear friend, do you remember me quoting a Hegel text? On second thoughts, maybe I didn't present it as a quotation, cheat that I am. Anyway, it is an extremely intelligent text, and it talks about the difference between separated, disjunctive satisfactions, where each need finds its fulfilment (or not, as the case may be), but only in a contingent way – and
a society in which satisfaction is posited and supposed as essential, necessary, and not left to chance and circumstance. Even if the first 'praxis' gives more apparent satisfaction and freedom to more needs, the second 'praxis' is qualitatively superior. And what are its requirements? Not only that needs be transformed into desires, and known and recognized as such, but that this should transpire on a global scale, with vital necessities transformed into powers, into freedoms. And that goes far beyond the determinations to which contemporary psychologists and sociologists limit themselves. It could be a criterion for distinguishing between socialism, even when it is economically backward, and capitalism, even when it is economically more developed.

Mr A: What did I tell you! This is philosophy.

Mr A: Excuse me, but it's an analysis with philosophical origins, using a method and concepts which used to be philosophical, and applying them to praxis and the real man as an empirical given. So it is not philosophy in the habitual sense — in the classical sense.

Mr A: Am I right in thinking that you are counting on young people to move towards this utopia of yours, and to try it out experimentally?

Mr B: Yes and no, my dear friend.

Mr A: Another of those balancing-act answers you seem to like so much. I didn't know you came from a circus background.

Mr B: My reply was dialectical: 'Yes and no'. No, because youth is an age class, not a social class, and cannot fulfil a historical mission. Yes, because it is an avant-garde. It scours the future. It marches in the vanguard, scanning and prefiguring the horizon. There is one thing about the youngsters I’ve been privileged to describe to you which I find very striking. They are immune to nihilism. Up until recently I believed in the nihilist threat. I use the word 'threat' figuratively. After all — and these two words mean exactly what they say: after all — it could be that nihilism is right. If it is, we can know it only after all has been attempted, and everything besides. But these youngsters do not seem to be attracted to nihilism. They are attempting something. They are following a certain pathway. To my great surprise, the nihilist hypothesis does not concern them for a single instant, and they want neither to affirm it nor to refute it. For the moment, at any rate. The
important thing is that as far as I can see, all these young people have an aim, something to hang on to. For some, it is cultural tactics and strategies based on the hypothesis of a great and magnificent renaissance in the USSR in the near future. They are betting on this hypothesis, and whether it comes to pass or not, it is incontestably a possibility. Others – and they interest me particularly – are concerned with the problems of urbanism and new towns. I say that they interest me, because these problems are at one and the same time precise and open-ended. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, since Gropius and Le Corbusier, these problems have become slowly and surely more apparent. Nowadays they are common to all societies, capitalist and socialist alike, even if it can be argued that only socialism will be able to resolve them, and that under capitalism the contradictions and powerlessness they imply have reached crisis point. To pose these problems one must explore the possible, and refuse to be limited to simply taking note of what has been accomplished. On these large housing estates the dimensions of the human being are revealed by what is missing rather than by what is actually there. Failures can teach us as much as successes. This is where participation can become meaningful again, or take on a new meaning. Perhaps you know how important the idea of human multidimensionality is to me: 'need–work–pleasure', or 'living–making–saying', or moments: play, love, rest? ... If we are to build a revitalized life in new towns – if, that is, we are to construct a 'virtual object' – we must use utopian method experimentally, looking ahead to what is possible and what is impossible, and transforming this hypothetical exploration into applicable programmes and practical plans.

Mr A: OK, OK, that's fine. But what about romanticism? ... I seem to have understood that we are still caught up in romanticism. Does this mean that utopianism is going to lead us back into it before we've even left it in the first place?

Mr B: In one sense, yes. The consequences of the old romanticism are still with us. What I mean by that, as you know, is a grotesque mixture of immoralism and moralism, anarchy which has become trivialized and tolerated by the bourgeoisie, daring which is limited to sexuality, a diffuse guiltiness in which everyone feels personally at fault for the state the world's been in ever since Eve ate the apple, and searches for innocence in humiliation. That's the burden the old romanticism has bequeathed to our left-wing ideology; we need to face up to it in order to rid ourselves of it and re-establish the conditions for a possible authenticity. But that's not all. Do you read the
agony columns? Women's magazines? No? You ought to. You would
rediscover the romantic cosmos, but demoted and dismantled, half-
aesthetic, half-ideological. . . .

Mr A (preoccupied): Do you believe in original sin?

Mr B (thoughtful): Yes and no! There are as many original sins as
there are babies born. Being born is the first sin. O felix culpa, as some
old chap or other once said! For whoever or whatever is born, original
sin means the limitations which emerge at the same time, directing
their future, determining and limiting their possibilities and fixing
their destiny. Marx wrote about the original sins of the bourgeoisie.
Socialism, too, has its original sins, serious ones — Stalinism, for
instance. I always try to avoid being triumphalist about things which
occur, simply because they are new or purport to be so. I am always
careful to scrutinize them for their original sins.

Mr A: My dear fellow, you're in cloud-cuckoo-land. I suspect you're
still more of a Christian than you think. All this about last judge-
ments, trials, supreme judges, original sin. . . .

Mr B (sarcastic): Other people have accused me of that many times.
Who were they? Idiots, of course. These Christian themes mean some-
thing, my dear friend; at the very least, they are symbols.

Mr A: We're straying from the point. Let me see if I can sum up. An
old romanticism which can't make up its mind to lie down and die,
but also a sequence of events which brought about a neoclassicism. Is
that it?

Mr B: More or less.

Mr A: The result: an inevitable schism.

Mr B: Agreed.

Mr A: So the situation now no longer has anything in common
with what happened as a result of the old romanticism round about
1825?

Mr B: But indeed it has! — the chaos, confusion and contradictions
accumulated in a period of transition which is both post-revolutionary
and pre-revolutionary. Wasn't 1825 in a post-revolutionary situation in
terms of 1789, and pre-revolutionary in terms of 1830? And what about us? We are living in the aftermath of the October Revolution, in a period when global transformations and revolutions in emerging countries are only just becoming apparent. These are ambiguous times, but the direction they are taking and the meaning they have are becoming increasingly clear. Like the men of 1825, we are suffering the consequences of serious failures, blunders and disappointments. Like the men of 1825, we cannot accept the old society, but nor can we unreservedly welcome the new one—as far as we can make it out beneath its veil of propaganda—even if we do feel sympathetic towards it. And we cannot accept ourselves. And then today, as in 1825, there are the young people and the uncertain way they relate to life; there they are, burdened with the full weight of all these contradictions, at centre-stage. And then there are children, a question mark, and women, ambiguously bearing the meaning of life while propagating triviality of the most virulent kind. And there is the search for an acceptable way of living, for an authenticity beyond false consciousness.

_Mr A:_ So the similarities are more important than the differences? And so? A new romanticism?

_Mr B:_ Not so fast. I must also go over the differences again. In 1960: a decrepit art, which no one believes capable of producing a ‘world’, a human construct, half-fiction, half-reality, fit for clear-sighted people to live in. Rejection of aestheticism, like cardboard scenery stuck over an unlivable reality. Apparently, no pilot art able to give the kind of impetus music supplied for romanticism. The end of individualism and the individualist spirit. The requirement for group thought and action, no matter how circumscribed. Urgent and relatively precise problems, such as urbanism—new towns, problems which make utopianism rational and transfer it from the realm of the imagination into almost positive reason by turning it into a method. The question of totality.

_Mr A_ (exasperated): I ask for an answer, and you come up with a list of problems and their givens. You are just going back again to what you said before. You’re as slippery as an eel. Hell’s bells, an answer, please!

_Mr B:_ Allow me to explain, my dear friend. This is just the prelude. I would like to consider a supersession of romanticism and classicism which would also be a supersession of art, but would have the restitution of the romantic spirit as its fulcrum, while rejecting the
consequences and degeneracies of the attitude which now bears its name; I would like to aim my sharpest criticisms at neoclassicism. . . .

At this moment in time, neoreformism is rife on the political level, and the people who talk most about revolution are in fact making a tactical retreat into simple democracy. From that perspective these views of mine put me in a very advanced position on what is called the ‘cultural’ level.

Mr A: Do you think that’s clear?

Mr B: I don’t intend it to be clear. Do you, too, want language that merely gives clear-cut orders? A dogmatism? But if I offered you dogmas and slogans, you would protest!

Mr A: Why so much quibbling? Half of what you say goes on for too long, the rest you just skate over, and all you end up with are problems, and more problems, and question marks! . . . Problems! Still more problems! Nothing but problems! As a philosopher would say, what a problematic! Your readers must be thoroughly fed up. They want answers. Answer!

Mr B: There can never be too many question marks. The important thing is to put them in the right place: after the possibilities, and consequently the options, have been stated. ‘Problems’ and ‘possibilities’ go together. A universal problematic would be rather vacuous. But ‘possibilities’ give ‘problematics’ a content and a meaning. Once a precise problem has been pinned down, together with its possible solutions, it has already become an answer, don’t you think? We have walked a long road together, you and I, and you think you have wasted your time because it wasn’t a wide avenue with pollarded trees and the Sleeping Beauty’s castle at the end of it. What have I tried to demonstrate? That romanticism is not an attitude or a state of the soul, and that it becomes so only when it degenerates. Per se, it is more of a movement, an ever-repeated departure, a perpetual challenge, an already practical prescience of what is possible and what is impossible. That is how I would understand the new romanticism. But until such time as there is a complete break with the old romanticism and its consequences, I would reject the term.

Mr A: So find an alternative!

Mr B: What for? Yet another ‘ism’? I will open my box of possibilities and see if I can find a word for it or not. Surely you’re not one of
those people who believe that something or someone cannot exist until there is a word to label them with!

Mr A: You’ve given me an idea. You maintain that art is in crisis?

Mr B: Crisis, crisis – it’s a vague word, very vague.

Mr A: But isn’t it a question of language? What I mean is: isn’t it the question of language? At the beginning of the nineteenth century, literature and art were stagnating. The romantics took a blunt instrument, the noble language of classicism. They sharpened it, made it like new, and with this new implement, this revitalized language, literature and art soon came bouncing back.

Mr A: My dear friend, you’re the one who’s bouncing back, towards a problem – yes, another one – an important one, but also a minor one. In reply I would say that it is not only the vocabulary at our disposal which has been worn down to the bone. Our semantics is exhausted, too. Attempts are made to rejuvenate it with perverse paradoxes and tortuous turns of phrase: weird words, neologisms, archaisms, baroque formulations and featherbrained flourishes, phoney hyperboles or litotes. But to no avail. In my opinion things are even worse than that. The very foundations of language are being thrown into doubt. In theory and in practice. Yes they are! Formerly theory, reason and language were considered to be means of communication, transparent intermediaries or middlemen between solid realities. And then it became apparent that these seemingly solid realities – the consciousnesses of individuals – were no such thing. Their compactness was thrown into doubt, and rightly so, as was their ability to be open to communication. At the same time, it was noticed that the hitherto transparent intermediary had a reality of its own, its ‘structures’. A reality? An opacity, therefore, or a tendency to refract, a specific obscurity. Language is not a simple medium, a perfect go-between, a pure and simple reflection of things and men. It is not the logos incarnate, reason made flesh and the equal of totality. If it is men, not words, who wield power, there are men who abuse words and exploit them by dint of the fact that they use and misuse them. Language acts like a real milieu. It refracts. It filters. It intervenes. It has its own effectiveness, for good or for ill, and must be treated accordingly. But first and foremost, it must be studied accordingly. It is not totally clear, nor is it adequate for encompassing totality. It, too, is ambiguous. Thus simultaneously our era has discovered the reality of language and its limitations. It has become an object of
knowlege. At the same time it has begun to collapse, and to all intents and purposes it appears to be disintegrating. At the same time, communication, signification and languages are being fetishized and compromised. There are so many languages that we no longer know what language is. Since the elaboration of the notions of language as a coherent and formal structure, and a system of arbitrary signs, it is as though a veritable conspiracy is being mounted against it. It is clear that true communication – understanding – is rare, and if it is to make any headway, misunderstandings will have to be sorted out. On a practical level, no one has any confidence in language any more. It has let us down, so we feel vindictive towards it. At the same time, signification is fetishized, it becomes the keyword of every branch of thought. So we have an extremely curious set of circumstances. I’m sorry there are so many ‘on the one hand ... on the other’s, but how can one do without them? On the one hand, there is an attempt to form a philosophy of language, signs and communication. If you take a good look you will see that all our most recent philosophers, or the best among them, are philosophers of language or signs. Although language is only one level of experience and one part – the most structured – of the semantic field, which is itself a part of praxis, they see it as the centre, the nucleus, the essence. They will talk about ‘the logos’, or ‘discourse’. They still see it as the agent for reason. The last, the ultimate refuge of philosophy would be discourse, perfectly coherent, the key discourse, made up of keywords; or again, the universal semantics explaining all significations in a perfect language, a metalanguage. They even go so far as to allege that names give existence to whatever they designate, and that everything which is has its name, is nameable and already named. Semanticists have one recurring nightmare: the unnameable. It is as though modern semantics is reviving the art of the magician: control over things by uttering their names. But on the other hand, language and confidence in language have suffered a body blow. The overvaluation of communication and the fetishization of signification have brought with them a great scepticism. What is there to communicate, and with whom? How can we exhaust significations? How can we protect them from exhaustion? The more dilapidated language gets, the more elaborate the grand conspiracy against it seems to become. We are witnessing a sort of destruction of language, as serious as the destruction of reason which Lukács has so tendentiously and questionably described. And in France the operation is being led by the men of the Left. The Right conserves the noble language of classicism. The gentlemen of the Académie Française write well, correctly, distinctly. In the East, on the socialist side, language is rigorously maintained, heavy, monotonous,
doctrinal and pedantic, and these are all features of neoclassicism. But that dear old French ideological Left of ours keeps blithely on the offensive. It makes the raids of the Golden Horde look like garden parties! Let us leave the past to one side — Bergson, etc. — but we should still keep Dada, automatic writing and Lettrism in mind, as they are of particular interest. Today Jean-Paul Sartre abuses language like a demented virtuoso, while Raymond Queneau hangs, draws and quarters it like some urbane executioner. The former accumulates words, the latter dismantles them, leaving our poor language in his trail like a doll which has been dismembered by a slightly perverse little girl intent on investigating its innards. And yet — if you will excuse these intellectual comings and goings of mine — these writers and rhetors are right. The literary and ideological Left is correct. Profoundly. This is the only way towards something new; if we are to face up to the challenge of the need to be creative, we must see the ordeal through to the bitter end. The literary Left ratifies praxis. It is praxis which casts doubts on language. The audiovisual image has devalued words and discourse; it is supplanting them; it does not constitute a language in itself, but a repertoire of signs which are close to being signals. Acronyms, those signal variants, proliferate. The world of images, signals and acronyms is compromising not only spoken language, but the language of sounds and colours! It is like a contamination. Advertising uses and exploits all this to show behaviour patterns via an indiscriminate mixture of images, signs and signals. For me this is yet another reason to think that if there is anything which can create a new answer to the multiple challenges of praxis, then it will be not constructs (literary or otherwise), but actions. Actions alone can bring the semantic field into line with the life which is possible, and by this I mean actions, carried out by a group, or by groups, which will create a lifestyle. Only a lifestyle will be able to bring language back into line with praxis.

Mr A: My dear fellow, pray get your breath back. I'm still not convinced. . . . I must admit that. . . . I find what you say disturbing. I need to think about it. Let's put it on hold for the moment. I've just had another idea. I suspect you of a secret vice — let's call it an anthropological or ethnographical romanticism. And you're not the only one. I know some people who are obsessed with the Third World, as it's called, and expect the Blacks and the Yellows to come up with the salvation of culture and, even better than that, the salvation of presence and communication. I seem to remember that in the book you have already mentioned, Pour entrer dans le XX° siècle, your friend Jean Duvignaud indulges in that quite a bit. Some of Lévi-Strauss's disciples
and friends seem to be moving in that direction too, although he himself seems to have avoided it. The romantics turned back to the Middle Ages, the classicists turned back to Greece. Isn't this what you are doing with so-called primitive societies? Aren't you nostalgic about them, as though they had been able to retain the secret of a happiness which we have lost? Isn't this what your retreat from economic growth means, isn't it what your questioning of industrial and technicist society implies? Isn't it the secret behind your liking for symbols? For utopianism? My dear fellow, your adolescence is showing!

Mr B: My dear friend, I thank you, I really do, for giving me a chance to explain my position on this. I think it is important, and my explanation will last as long as it needs to. I will begin by asking you to bear with me while I read a little text to you. Just a jiffy. . . . Yes, here it is, in the drawer where I keep my identity card, my passport and my tax forms. Have I whetted your curiosity? What is it? A curriculum vitae. It should help me to explain my position, because frankly, I get rather irritated when people start accusing me of primitivism. Here goes. . . .

Curriculum vitae of Mr B, utopian, ex-philosopher (no, sorry: philosophical critic of philosophy)

I was born in around 1505, and I mean around 1505, because in those days, unless you could afford to consult an astrological technician who specialized in time and dates, the accuracy of such details was deemed unimportant. My family? Comfortably off, but ordinary. My native village was built by a bridge across the river – the Gave – which separated the Basques from their brothers and foes, the Béarnais. The people living on either side of the Gave gathered there to drink, fight, trade and fornicate, males and females joyfully rubbing their bacon together when the battling and the boozing of the day was done; all of which ensured that the little town was a decent and comfortable place to live. It was situated between a wealthy, peaceful country and an impoverished, belligerent one; life there was agreeable and varied. The great steamroller called the state – yes, exactly, ye friends and countrymen who lend me your ears, the state: yours, the state of Paris, of the French, of kings and Republics – had not yet rolled over this countryside; it had not yet flattened it and levelled it out; the bourgeoisie, with its mania for classifying and segregating, had not yet separated the regions, the ages, the sexes, the trades and the arts. If I loathe the state, if I loathe the bourgeoisie, it is not just because I can still remember those times as though they were the
Golden Age, but those memories are an important factor, nevertheless. What a succulent life we led in that old France of ours, before it became France! We knew that golden mediocrity which even the poets of Antiquity mourned in song. In those days bread, fruits, grapes and wine had all their savour. An admirable art of living enhanced the little wealth and possessions there were. A heresy, the greatest of all, the true heresy, had left many traces – the heresy which links love with the sun, and the soul with its luminous origins, the tenacious heresy of shepherds and herdsmen who spent their nights contemplating the stars. We had yet to be burdened with the gabelle, the King’s taxes, bailiffs and sergeants at arms. Consequently, our lives were relatively free from injustice. Our lords were ordinary people, like us, cocks of the walk rather than masters, and we knew how to put them in their place if they got too big for their boots. We had yet to experience the Huguenot heresy and drink the sour wine of Jansenism, which were to fill our hearts and souls with tyranny. In those days half the inhabitants wandered the highways freely. The younger sons went in search of adventure, the elder ones went to places of pilgrimage (without believing in it too much, and intent on laughing and dancing as much as possible), and the fathers visited cousins and colleagues in their comfortable abodes. They were a jolly crowd, capering their bawdy way along the roads through dust or mire, all boys and girls together, light but not lascivious. They loved making love in the chapels, hermitages and oratories which opportunely graced many a crossroads. There were always a couple of friendly monks on hand to absolve sins for the odd obole or an extra little sin, pardonable in advance. The resultant offspring would always find a father – that was an unwritten and uninfringeable law of this patriarchal way of life, a law of the heart and of other things besides which have been long forgotten. The prince was a good little prince, and could justifiably claim to be called the father of his people; his droit du seigneur (which he exercised parsimoniously, since he would have been hard pressed to perform his duty every time it was demanded of him) meant that every family enjoyed the honour of having an elder child who could claim to be the son of a king. It was only later, when things started to go sour, that family honour and young girls’ maidenheads were taken seriously. How well I remember those times! Although I was the eldest son, I was a spirited youngster, and because I was more of a little rascal and more alert than the other children, the village priest decided to teach me Latin. I should not omit to mention that this good curate was seriously courting one of my mother’s sisters, and one night, in accordance with certain traditions as old as time immemorial, some pranksters took some wet
straw which looked suspiciously like dung and spread it between my house and the village church. Lord God Almighty, how we laughed, the whole village, the countryside around, all the family, and pretty Maité too, blushing up to the roots of her hair; and the youngsters of the village, yours truly among them, marched in procession along this unusual path, waving shitty monstrances and beating time on old saucepans and cauldrons with sticks, a veritable pandemonium. But prithee take note of this: despite all these rustic ribaldries, we people of times of yore also invented the heartache of love: 'I sing, it is I who sing, but I sing not for myself, I sing for my beloved ....'.  

God be with you, and may he keep your breath fresh. So I learned Latin with my unofficial uncle, with the most honourable of intentions; on the day the news reached us from far-off Italy of a great battle lost by the equally far-off King of France, I was droning: 'Et introibo ad altare Dei, qui laetificat juventutem meam'. The news meant nothing to us. When I was only just fifteen I ran away from home, and joined a wandering crowd of sunburnt gipsies, horse-dealers with their donkeys and mules, shepherds with or without their flocks, tinkers, pilgrims, all grouped together to climb the mountain passes safe from attack from brigands or rogue soldiers. Working a little here in the fields or minding flocks, begging a little there, soaked by the rain or scorched by the fierce sun’s rays, frequently famished, sometimes fed, unknown to their brothers and husbands, by women and girls with big hearts and open arms, fed and invigorated by said damsels, and frequently exhausted by them too, I walked the length and breadth of Aragon and the Basque Provinces, and reached Santiago de Compostela safe and sound. It was already past the heyday of its splendour. As soon as you could say hey-nonny-no I turned my back on Saint Jacques and set off on the leisurely journey home. One May evening, as I watched over some flocks in the meadows of Roncal, I encountered something which was to decide my fate. At the foot of a cross to which he was clinging with his hands, a poor old monk lay dying; I ran to gather water in my bonnet to moisten his feverish lips and forehead. He blessed me, and saucy varlet though I was, and merrie-tongued withal, all ruddy with health but kipper-thin i’faith, I was mightily amazed, edified and filled with pity to behold the compunction with which the worthy monk performed the gestures of his ministry. Verily the frater was nearing the great leap beyond – the moment of truth, as ruffians, reprobates and Beelzebub’s brood call it when they have any recollection of the Divine Word. In expiring tones, thus spake the monk: 'My dear son, if I am not leaving this vale of tears for the better, then I am leaving it for the worse. You have shown me charity, and I want to reward you. Abandon not my corpse
on this forsaken pathway, prey to carrion crow and forest beast. Your
duty accomplished, you will take my knapsack, where you will find a
holy relique, a beautiful white bone of Saint Joseph the father – adop­tive,
of course – of Our Lord. Take it without fear; because I give it to
you with my blessing, the fortune it will bring you will be good rather
than ill. It will allow you to reach a ripe old age as I have done without
doing anything more wearisome than going from village to hamlet,
and from hamlet to welcoming town, offering weak humanity the
relique to kiss so as to be purified, sanctified and thereinafter blessed.
Above all, my son, remember the prayer I am about to teach you,
learn it by heart from my mouth before it closes for evermore: “Like
a flea, by virtue of this bone, my sinful soul will leap from this earth of
suffering to the true paradise, over hell and purgatory! Like a flea,
remember that, my son, like a flea!”

Having transmitted the sacred heritage, the monk tightened his
grip on the cross, and died. The bone in his lunchbag looked more
ram than man; but doubt would have been sacrilegious, heretical and
unworthy; was not the word of a holy man, anointed with the Lord’s
unction, worth as much as the word of the Lord in person? And then,
who knows how the people from those ancient times, the saintly ones
of yore, were built? Who could say? Who could go and verify?
’Srounds, ’twas piously I did inhume the monk on a litter of herbes
and dried grasses, according to the ritual in the Shepherds’ Calendar.
Henceforth merrily I did live, presenting my relique, preferably to
women, but also to children, and to old cripplèd ones. With my bone,
I touched the bellies of young cows, mules, barren sheep and women
too, and the swellings of women with child, and the humps of hunch-
backs, and the bandages of people with dropsy, and all manner of
dubious excrescences, tumours, cankers, and I know not what besides.
Wherever I went I blessed, I cured, I fertilized, most bountifully. Thus
did I go, reaping the fruits of my bone, and prolific they were, i’faith!
Many a time, men would scowl and cry: ‘Bone of a ram! Ram yourself!
Avaunt ye, do not turn about our wives and daughters, bollicky
beastie, stinking ram, hornèd beastie, cloven-footed beastie, steer
clear lest we roll up your monkish shirt and rub the cheeks of your
arse with nettles until you cannot sit down for three weeks and are
forced to observe Lenten abstinences, like it or not . . . ’. How
unpleasant were these words, obliging me to revile these good folk as
louts, heretics and impious ones, vouchsafing them the illest of ills,
starting with cuckoldry, the first and last virtue of a bone from Saint
Joseph.

Come rain or shine, laughing much and sometimes weeping, thus
did I live thinking neither of good nor of evil, until one day near
Poitiers in Poitou, far from my native country, I spied Maître François. I lie: it was he who spied me first, and he nearly died laughing when he saw my bone. His muzzle split from ear to ear, which were greatly distant one from the other, and the good Maître thought he would expire on the spot of a dislocated jawbone or ruptured diaphragm. Verily this would have procured him the goodlie death of a philosopher or sage. Quoth he to me: ‘Gaye dogge, thou seemst neither moron nor maledict. Whither goest thou? Goest thou straight before thee towards those distant shores where poor Ovid lived in exile, and where, according to certain naughtie matagrobolists, he was foolish enough to abandon the cult of Venus for that of the Crucified One? Indeed, poor lecher from a low-lying land, you cannot retrace your steps without being torn to pieces by all the cuckolds you have made, and your flese to sausagemeat y-grounden. Nay, go no further forward. Art not pissed off with whirling hither and thither like a weathercocke? Throw thy old haunch on the rubbish-heap, there by the wayside; be my disciple and follow me!’ ‘Verily, nay!’ quoth I, ‘If I follow thee I must first leave my haunch appropriately labelled in the left-relique office for pilgrims at Corps-Saints, a place well known by wandering monks, near unto Limoges, where resteth the Holy Foreskin beknown of thee, Maître. There it will stay until the resurrection of the flese of which it is the pledge and the troth; and there some dizzie wanderer will come to claim it, thus perpetuating the pious perambulations in nomine Joseph, patron of fathers with large families, favourite of they who sport beards and whiskers, and whose beneficent name will advantage all those who are thus y-clept, and will reveal him in saecula saeculorum. Amen . . .’. Maître François, still laughing full-throatedly, sweetly spake: ‘Come, come, be thou not so vulgar a foe of our Holy Church and Religion. Respect it in face and in manner, all the more to be merrie under thy cassock, within thy inner selfe. Let dogges bark, let curates preach and pray, let bumpkins bray, and leave all the agitation to ambitious men; see with a wise man’s eyes the men of violence who threaten, the disappointed who imprecate. Roam the wide world, see the wandering flocks of cuckolds and unfortunates, join with them if need be; contemplate the hordes of perversitie and wickedness. But for now, come with me, cut the cackle, and let us down a bumper or two. Together we will study science and practise, sacred vessels and holy retorts in which God, idem est Mother Nature, prepares and concocts fecund liquors, reasons of Semen. . . .’

Heavens above! Hell! I was about to revive those goodlie memories, and bring them back to sunne’s light; I was about to narrate how I followed Maître Rabelais, studying eternal and temporal Nature under
his tutelage, first in merrie towns – Toulouse, Montpellier – then in Italy; and how I left him in Ferrara after being sorely frighted one night by frescoed demons painted on a wall, while in a nearby road I could hear the clashing swords of soldiers of fortune; and how I lived in Paris in France, worthily practising the art and science of medicine; upon which I came back to my native country, but not without stopping to enjoy the library and the company of Maitre Michel de Montaigne; his library, say I, ungratefully forgetting to mention his vineyard and kitchen garden, where one day, filling my nostrils with autumnal odours, I listened to Maitre Michel reading his sweet writing y-clept On Four Verses by Virgil, which i’faith delighted me; and having taken leave of my second master, at last I arrived in my native village, and in the house where I was born I set up my practice of medicine and teacher of wisdom according to Nature, honoured by all as a good man, and there I died at a goodlie age, healthy in mind and body, and fatte with life’s feaste, but not before I had drunk to the birth of him who later became King of Navarre and of France, and who I believe to have been a whoreson rogue if ever there was one, but it would take too long to explain the whys and wherefores. I was also going to tell how I was reborn, and several times, and on one occasion in the abode of the worthy Maitre Restif, of Vermonter, farmer and notary, who had procreated or re-created me in the person of the younger brother of a certain Nicolas with whom I fought because I did not like the perverse way he invoked the devil and seduced young virgins; and I fought with him too, I admit, because I envied him his prettie face and wheedling tongue. I was intent on concealing nothing, when suddenly I awoke from my golden slumbers; it was not a dream any more, but a disagreeable vision. It was not the hornèd demon I saw breathing the fires of hell into my face and up my arse, and sharpening his pitchforks and cauldrons of boiling oil, but lo and behold! the Grand Inquisitor Father Kanapa of the minor order of Saint Joseph (Stalin) and His Eminence Monsignor Garaudy, and the little cleric and choirboy Lucien Sève, and Canon Murry, huddled together writing bulls of excommunication and lettres de cachet: 'In view of the seriousness of the circumstances, the intensity of the ideological struggle, and the reactionary offensive against Marxism and against materialism and against dialectic in nature, given the need for a hard, monolithic consciousness, forged with Stalinian steel, it is decreed that henceforth joking will be forbidden in France among Marxists and fellow-travellers, on pain of being declared a heretic, a backslider, a witch, a foe, and of being publicly roasted to death over a slow fire, the execution to be carried out by the secular branch. Priority will be accorded to the prosecution of
Dionysian and Rabelaisian revisionism, given that it professes belief in nature and the external world, whereas We have decreed that We and only We militant materialists alone believe in it. . . . And from this day forth it is forbidden to believe in the external world without our written authorization, duly signed and sealed.’ My dear friend, you who listen to me, what a dreary vision it was – not so much a vision of hell as a vision of boredom – and it completely put me off going any further with this, the curriculum vitae of your humble servant, Mr B.

Mr A (politely): Have you finished? When will you start being serious? Never? When it's too late?

Mr B: I am very serious. Do you want me always to express myself in numbered arguments? Well, just to please you, here are my ideas, one by one. First, classicism is linked to a closed and highly structured society – that is to say, the state – as ontology is linked to bureaucracy. It is irrelevant that the state may have been historically determined and necessary. The fact remains that the absolute monarchical state planed France down like a plank on a lathe, and created classicism by reviving the oldest myths of power. Without abolishing history, and thus being still based on a centralized state, the eighteenth century attempted to recuperate something of the vitality and spontaneity which had been lost, some of the turbulence and froth of life. As for romanticism, it opened thought and feelings to the world – so much so that they became lost in it; it opened minds to what could be possible. My second argument is as follows: in the past there have been relatively happy periods – in the thirteenth century, perhaps, and in the first half of the sixteenth. And it’s true: to a certain extent I am a sixteenth-century man!

Mr A: At last you admit it! The romanticism of an archaic past!

Mr B: Not at all! That’s all over! The Islands of the Blessed are gone for ever. There are several forms of happiness which we Westerners have ravaged; and maybe our ideas and our technology are currently in the process of ravaging whatever happiness has survived. It’s all over. The nostalgia for Paradise Lost, for repetition, for pure nature, strikes me as absurd. The best this noble longing of Beautiful Souls can hope to do nowadays is to swell the coffers of the Club Méditerranée. Happiness? Like love, it must be reinvented. The true life is not here. Archaism, did you say? So culture is one big job lot, take it or leave it? Does it come down to us as a single bequest? Surely, if the word culture has any meaning at all, it is that someone
can cross the centuries and maybe discover his cultural fellows in the past. And again, there is uneven development, a notion which seems to me to have been inadequately explained. . . .

Mr A: You haven't answered my real question. Are you counting on the new nations, today's new nations, yes or no? I'm not referring to the USA, which is plainly becoming an old country, or even the USSR, where the Revolution is no longer in its prime and is maturing more or less satisfactorily, I'm thinking of those countries which at times are called the 'Third World', and at other times 'the emerging nations'. What do you expect of them?

Mr B (plainly humming and hawing, and unwilling to be pinned down): Ahem, er . . . it's true that some of us have hoped that these peoples, or their culture, would one day achieve a marriage between spontaneous vitality and industrial technicity.

Mr A: And so . . . ?

Mr B (unable to hide his discomfort): We can see them going blithely in directions we know only too well: they are burning the things they loved; they are shooting ahead too fast.

Mr A (making the most of his advantage): Are they becoming one of these utopias of yours, yes or no?

Mr B: Maybe yes, maybe no. It is certainly true that I do not believe that humanity will ever rediscover sexual happiness, no matter what kind of society develops, or a mythology as brilliant as that of the Hopi culture, for example. And yet, the idea of direct relations between nature and men, and of a new spontaneity built on new foundations. . . .

Mr A: Maybe yes, maybe no? Very illuminating!

Mr B: In any event, if East–West relations are to be thawed. . . .

Mr A: Yes, yes, we know.

Mr B: As far as I'm concerned, I once got to know some archaic ways of life, or the last traces of them, in a peripheral area of provincial France, and that is something I will never forget. It taught me a lot. I learned what a human order of things could be, where man would not
live separate from the world, or from the consciousness of being, but in a fruitful unity. I still refer back to it. From that point of view, you are probably right. If I've understood Engels's idea that each step forward humanity takes always leaves traces behind it, and if I've even remotely understood the profound theory of uneven development, it is thanks to those experiences. I refer back to them, without turning the reference into a philosophical principle – that's the main thing.

Mr A: You are theorizing, using the archaic as your starting point for a critique of industrial civilization as a whole.

Mr B (on the attack again): I have already pointed out to you how obscure the concept of industrial civilization as a whole is. Moreover, industrial civilization, as you call it, is a ferocious self-critic. The East criticizes the West, and the West gives tit for tat. These criticisms are in bad faith; they spring from false consciousness, ideological illusions, and hell knows what else besides. Yet each one hits the nail on the head in terms of the other's shortcomings. I am not wildly in favour of socialism as it is now, as well you know; I've been reviled for it often enough; I've kept a critical mind, double-bladed, one for each side. They are all right, and up to a certain point the criticisms of each side are valid as regards the other, and they are all wrong as far as their unconditional self-congratulations are concerned. This mutual critique is surely the best thing there is about peaceful coexistence. Doesn't it pose certain conditions for supersession? But that doesn't stop me opting for socialism.

Mr A: Do you think that's clear?

Mr B: And do you think the situation itself is clear? Do we know what will come out of 'global' technicity, here and over there? A world state? The withering away of localized states? The galactic adventure, with men staying the way they are? The 'world' left behind the very moment we become conscious of it? Cosmic madness? Global or localized technocracy? Cybernetization? The use of utopian method, as I've described it, involves the rejection of certain possibilities in order to energize certain others. Its aim is to render certain possibilities impossible. That is the great struggle which lies ahead.

Mr A: Just the same, when you go on talking about lifestyles, about the dialectic of play and seriousness, about moments, about style in pleasure and love, aren't you reviving some of the characteristics of certain pre-capitalist cultures or civilizations?
Mr B: And why shouldn’t I? Wasn’t it one of Marx’s great ideas? He thought that Communism ought to take up primitive communism, but on a higher level, with custom replacing law, sensual pleasure eradicating so-called political economy, wisdom taking over from speculative philosophy, enabling the individual to develop fully, and gradually to subordinate the social domain to his desires, thus going beyond morality (both objective and subjective) and immorality.

Mr A: You mean that your starting point is an anthropology?

Mr B: The correct question at last! And my answer is still ‘yes and no’. Yes, an anthropology, because it is a question of grasping man, and man in his totality – the total human phenomenon, if you like (to avoid confusion with ‘the total man’). Yes, then, because until further notice there is no one science able to formulate the total question of man, let alone answer it. Sociology has a contribution to make, but it lapses into sociologism, just as psychology lapses into psychologism and history into the philosophy of history, that is, historicism. Yes, then, and let me remind you how our study of the old romanticism revealed its error, and the reason – one of the reasons – for its failures: the dissociation of the cosmological principle from the anthropological principle, and its fetishization. But also, no. No, in so far as anthropology tends to separate man from nature, instead of starting out from their dialectical (i.e. conflictual) unity. No, in so far as anthropology becomes cultural: culturalism, structuralism. No, in so far as anthropology thinks it can define man by such-and-such a generic or specific characteristic, man-in-himself, outside of the world and of nature, without nature. Regardless of whether this specific characteristic of man-in-himself is called ‘essence’ or ‘existence’, whether it be a question of consciousness or consciousness in death or freedom or I know not what – laughter, even – it all slips between the fingers and evaporates. Existence and essence can be rediscovered only in the archaic or the pathological. In other words, I do not believe in being, or essence, or in the existence of man in isolation. Despite all the ambiguities attached to the term, I think there is a ‘human nature’, that is, a nature and a humanity which are inseparable, but locked in such a conflict that the way ahead for man is via extreme abstraction, extreme artifice and extreme alienation of nature. This ‘human nature’ is something which creates itself, practically, by trial and error, starting from nature and moving towards another nature – or, better still, a nature-other-than-itself, through many necessities and many often indiscernible perils.
Mr A: More philosophy.

Mr B: No, praxis. Praxis creates, but not in a vacuum, and not all at once. And it is not easy to describe this praxis, to analyse it or to present it in its totality, and to capture the creativity produced within it – which consists of genuine *production* – among the vast mass of repetitions, cycles, returns, revivals and gestures, which purely and simply re-produce themselves. The fragmentation of the sciences has led to intellectual confusion, and this is particularly exemplified by my learned colleagues the economists, who have used vulgarized Marxism to specialize and obscure the concept of *production* which Marx so brilliantly explored: man’s production of himself, but including nature.

Mr A: You seem to be equating production with creation.

Mr B: Wouldn’t you agree that the word has accrued too many pseudo-philosophical, aesthetic and poetic overtones?

Mr A: Possibly.

Mr B: One of my current convictions is that only a relatively small group can ‘produce’ a way of life – not simply by being the mediator and critical consciousness of large human groups nowadays, but also by creating expressivity, language, and embodying a moment of totality. That is my experimental utopia.

Mr A: You couldn’t have put the fact that you need to supersede your own romanticism more clearly.

Mr B: But of course! It is a transition, a new departure, a challenge – the final challenge, perhaps. We cannot go on waiting for ever for capitalist society to come to an end, or for global socialism to come into being, or for a twentieth-century renaissance in some socialist or emerging country. The political struggle for socialism must be accepted and continued, but it does not offer a necessary and sufficient style. From that point of view, it has failed. And the only meaning left for philosophy is to proclaim and uphold this challenge, the true challenge, the great one – which, I might add, is beyond the scope of literature. The philosopher? He should try to emulate Socrates, and be provocative, elusive, ironic. He should reintroduce the practice of maieutic into society.
Mr A: And nihilism?

Mr B: I don’t see it as a threat. What I’m more concerned with is the rise of moral order. I see it growing, taking root, hardening, playing on the common yet contradictory fronts of dogmatism and moralism, from the Right to the extreme Left, from the Vatican to Moscow or Peking. Believe you me – to use rather unphilosophical terminology – I’m fed up to the back teeth with moral order! Call me a neoanarchist if you like. In my view, young people can neither evade these problems nor avoid a difficult period of refusal, rebellion, recreation of totality (or of the perspective of a totality), and consequently of utopianism, of romanticism lived and overcome.

Mr A: You seem to be confusing a whole heap of things: the romantic Left, left-wing romanticism, revolutionary romanticism and the romanticism of revolution, literary romanticism and the political romanticism of the left-wing intellectuals who back the FLN.81

Mr B: Not at all. Putting political options to one side (and as you know, I have opted for socialism, for revolution, and – if you want me to spell it out – for ‘Communism’, despite the equivocal and rigid connotations of the term), I want a complete break with the ideology of the Left. It goes without saying that I totally reject the grotesque ‘screen’ theory, which sees the ideology of the Left as something which obstructs contact between Marxism and the masses, and thus as the first thing which must be destroyed. No. In France, and elsewhere, the Left is already like a bomb site, and new plants are growing there. It’s a no-man’s-land, and I’ve no intention of setting up house there. I want somewhere else, somewhere that’s lived in.

Mr A (tenacious and virulent): What it boils down to, my dear chap, is that you’re a dyed-in-the-wool optimist. The proletariat of the industrialized and advanced countries is failing to fulfil its historical mission? So you appeal to young people, or rather, to certain small groups of young people. Marxism never took demography or technology into account; demographic pressure is overturning Marxist predictions about an imminent era of abundance, and so is the growth in needs; technology is becoming a virtually autonomous power in its own right. And you still talk about utopianism. I tell you, you’re a dyed-in-the-wool optimist.

Mr B: Alas! Would that I were! I could easily show that I’m only relatively – and very relatively – optimistic, and only after a hard struggle
against pessimism – I nearly said nihilism. There are times when one feels so disgusted it's like scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Mr A: And where is this relative optimism leading you?

Mr B: I've told you. First, towards a sort of catharsis, a little course of radical critique and negativity. It's one of those periods in life one has to put up with, without making too much of it. A period of purification, a time to clear the air, to get rid of a few stale smells – at least for certain people, the 'happy few'. You see, my ideas follow a certain logic. I'm back to Stendhal again. And then, after becoming conscious of all the contradictions, it's the challenge, the new departure. It's modern Socratism.

Mr A: But what is that? And the departure to where?

Mr B: Towards what Gorki called 'the third reality'. And wasn't it Klee who wrote: 'The world in its present form is not the only possible world' – referring, I suppose, not only to the social world but also to the material world. And Ernst Bloch: 'What we are is coming towards us'... And finally, this: 'The modern man is a prey to the possible.' 'To wish for the impossible in order to have everything possible!'

Mr A: Is that last quotation your own? Then perhaps you could say something more precise about this theory of the possible, which according to you is not a philosophy any more?

Mr B: Why not? I'll limit myself to a summary, because a detailed account would be lengthy, extremely lengthy. Let us take a blank sheet of paper. There we are. On the left side, I'll write 'Possibilities', and on the right, 'Impossibilities'. As a heading, I'll write the following: 'To Live Means To Open Up Possibilities. . . . The Most Real Moment, the Present, Is a Door Which Opens on to Possibilities.' Do you realize that these words supersede both the ontology of the constituted real and static 'values'? Fine. On the left, I'll write: 'Socialism'. I don't consider it determined in advance, but as a possibility; I could go on: several possible 'models' are on offer – Yugoslavia, USSR, China. To continue: in the same column, I'll write: 'Industrialized World Society . . . Cosmic Adventure'. And now, on the right, I'll put: 'Needs and Leisure of the Global Man' – in this day and age it is virtually inconceivable that we should know what they are. And underneath I'll put: 'Dangers of the Cosmic Adventure . . . '. Then I'll return to the left-hand column and write: 'Bourgeois or Non-Bourgeois Comfort. Conformism. Culture
without Tragedy, Life without Passions. Boredom.' And on the right: 'Total Acceptance. Total Refusal. Tragedy. Joy. Nihilism.' In my view these are different impossibilities, but they are all equally impossible. Back on the left: 'Communication. Information. Signification.' And opposite: 'Transparency. Authenticity. Total Expressivity.' Look carefully at the two columns, and how they relate line by line. Do you get it?

Mr A: Um! . . .

Mr B: Don’t let these words and the order they’re in stagnate in your head, dear chap. Let everything start moving! The impossibilities do not differ from the possibilities in the way that the abstract differs from the concrete, and vice versa. That’s an erroneous theory. The impossible can be perceived only via the possible, and the possible can be appreciated only via the impossible. The two meet; not only do we conceive of the one via the other, but we perceive them both in their contradictions, the one within the other and the one via the other. Complete communication, transparency in love or life or in society as a whole – these are things you conceive of only because partial communication leaves you dissatisfied. But you are dissatisfied only in the name of this possible impossibility: to say everything, the total testimony, transparency. The possible refers you to the impossible, the impossible refers you to the possible. Would you like me to dramatize this table a little? I’m afraid it might be a little too speculative and verbalized for you.

Mr A: You can but try. Don’t mind me.


Mr A . . . (pregnant silence).

Mr B: No comments?

Mr A: I’d like your table to be a little more precise, not so vague, more scientific.

Mr B: You don’t fool me for one minute. I know what you’re driving at. You’re thinking: ‘What a cheat, he’s bringing philosophy in by the back door disguised as utopianism, possibility, praxis, and the devil knows what else.’ Well, my dear fellow, it’s not philosophy at all, it’s science, but confronted with praxis!
Mr A (wary, reticent, vaguely hostile): Prove it!

Mr B: I could draw some serious arguments from the role of the aleatory in the sciences today, not only in physics and cybernetics, but in history and sociology too, and even in art, or what calls itself art. Just think about the way the general theory of games, tactics and strategies has been applied to history, sociology or psychology. The aleatory is being introduced into music – into electronic music, that is – into painting, and into other dubious experimental fields. But what is the aleatory? It is not pure chance. It is the possible and the impossible, the probable and the improbable, which boils down to the same thing. One should note that the aleatory is being introduced into calculations and machines, which means that they are in danger of harnessing the aleatory in social life and taking it over, so that the future of the aleatory is aleatory!

Mr A: Ouch! I would prefer a more concrete example, something more determined, more positive. . .

Mr B: The good old reliable real? If you wish. But you will be sidetracking a lot of pressing questions! Before you know it you’ll be a dogmatist, a philosopher, an ontologist. . . . Have you forgotten? I have already mentioned in passing that I am fully versed in rigorous scientific method, but I don’t want to bring it into play here. If on several occasions I have attempted to introduce some apparently vague notions, such as challenge, misunderstanding and misinterpretation, among the fundamental categories which allow us to know man and his relations with himself and with nature, it is because on the one hand I am relying on facts and on the other on rigorous, formalized and highly developed spheres of knowledge.

Mr A: My dear sir, an example, please.

Mr B: If you insist. But listen carefully, because it’s not easy. ‘Theorem of existence. . . . We have just demonstrated that the statistical structure of natural texts is such that one can recode it word for word in a cryptogram which can be decoded only by exhaustive method. . . .’ In other words, an unlimited number of operations. To continue: ‘We can notice that the statistical structure of language is such – and it is unique in this – that a certain code in which all the words end with an interval (and we will see that in a sense this is an optimum code) is indecipherable.’
Mr A: Eh? What gobbledygook! Who wrote that?

Mr B: This theorem of existence bears the name of today's greatest information theorist, Benoit Mandelbrot.83

Mr A: Delighted, I’m sure. But what does it mean . . . ?

Mr B: Concretely? You see, I’m finishing your sentences for you. It means that every linguistic information system which is open to translation via coding, decoding or recoding is characterized by an optimum code. The theory demonstrates both that this code exists and that it is impossible to construct it. Are you with me? The impossible and the possible?

Mr A: Er . . . Not really.

Mr B (inexorable): The optimum code allows the time for mistakes to be reduced to a minimum. It is up to practitioners to construct it by trial and error, by a series of approximations. Every coding and every translation of a signifying system into another system is decipherable. However, natural language and natural texts obey a law: their optimum code is indecipherable. In natural language, the limit of intelligibility cannot be reached by increasing the order of signs, nor can the highest intensity of communication be achieved by the quantity of information circulated. Redundancy is inevitable and surprise limited.

Mr A (slightly dazed and irritated): But what does this imply?

Mr B: A lot of things. First of all, the reciprocity of the possible and the impossible in the most frequent case where the aleatory, frequencies and formal structures have a role: language. When you speak, my dear chap, your language has rules for the use of distinct, separate words – grammar, syntax, logic – yet your sentences are not manufactured in advance. There is something unforeseen in their combinations, yet many of those combinations are governed by laws, especially if we consider the system – language – as a whole. That is point number one. Point number two is the impossibility of a philosophy which would be a perfect discourse, employing words from day-to-day language and translating the everyday utterances of opinion, of trivial social practice, into that perfect discourse. Without realizing it, philosophers set themselves the task of creating the universal metalanguage (something machines will achieve, without the
help of philosophy) or again, of translating all discourses into the perfect discourse, perfectly coherent, a secondary discourse in which everything would be defined, clear, completely explained. But such a discourse is impossible. At the same time, this demonstration proves the validity of technical and logical research into the constitution of a metalanguage. The perfect discourse would be indecipherable. Hence the enigmatic nature of clear language, and the inevitable use of obscurities to achieve dialectical profundity. Point number three is the disturbing possibility that thought will be completely or almost completely cybernated, with machines for translating or for thinking operating with systems of signs superior to natural language, which uses words separated by intervals. Point number four: the possibility of interpreting prose and poetry as languages which, just like natural discourse, involuntarily propose to construct by trial and error an optimum code to permit maximum clearness, increased informational surprise, minimum time for perception, rapid pre-correction of errors—not that it would be easy to attain these objectives simultaneously. This suggests that the theory of games and strategies could be applied to the literary message. And is there not a romanticism and a classicism in this—a romantic strategy aimed at maximizing the informational surprise, and a classical strategy aimed at maximizing the reliability of the transmission of the message?

Mr A (holds his head in his hands, and ponders): But this is an important theorem in the theory of the semantic field!

Mr B (agreeably surprised): But yes, of course it is! But there is one reservation. Information theorists deal only with signs and significations. They have difficulties (and I’m thinking of the efforts of Abraham Moles) in deriving aesthetic perception from the theory of signs. This is what I rather snidely call the fetishism of signification. My theory of the semantic field differs from information theory on one or two points. First, the semantic field is only one level of experience (of praxis), and language is only one level and one part of this semantic field. Secondly, I have demonstrated that in practice the sign is moving closer to the signal, which generates behaviour patterns; the semantic field is increasingly governed by the signalling pole; simply injecting a massive dose of new information will not stop this demotion of informational energy. And this leads us to the question of creativity and style. Moreover, I have demonstrated that symbols and signs are mutually exclusive, and that art must necessarily call upon symbolism, since expressive symbols per se become exhausted, and tend to become simple signs of an informational kind.
Given this, we can no longer conceive of the semantic field according to the model of molecular physics; it cannot be reduced to macro-linguistics. It really is a field, with content, lines of strength, poles, tensions, fluxes, discontinuities, units and signs.

Mr A: Oh, really? Now is there any chance of you getting nearer to lived experience, something tangible?

Mr B: You may not know it, but it is lived experience, it is tangible! . . . All right, you want some lived experience, so I’ll give you some! Have you ever asked yourself how individuals of different ages, who consequently have little in common except the fact that they are human beings who belong to the same society, manage to live together in the same social groups, be they narrow ones, such as families, or wider ones?

Mr A (somewhat nonplussed): Never! It’s very simple. I fail to see the problem.

Mr B: But such trivial, everyday matters do pose problems. How is interaction between children, adults and old people possible? With so many unforeseen circumstances, misunderstandings, ambiguities and conflicts, how is it that a ‘totality’ which is not only acceptable but positively welcomed can be achieved? Did you know that in new towns the absence of certain age groups – adolescents and old people – is making life impossible?

Mr A: Indeed, that’s very odd.

Mr B: For children, adults appear oppressive. They are oppressive. At the same time, they fascinate them. They present children with another ‘world’, the world of the adult, a world with aspects which are incompatible with the world of the child. Among adults, possibilities have been eliminated by an inexorable process of selection (all possibilities except one, the possibility which represents the mature individual and what he ‘is’). One moment the individual has to opt, the next moment the possibilities are weeded out by a series of failures. But childhood is a rich and undefined sea of possibilities, of limitless hopes, a fairyland where all is possible, where one child’s possibilities are mingled with those of other children. It is a world of magic, both imaginative and imaginary. It is a time when dreams are indistinguishable from waking life, when images are indistinguishable from reality, and when dreams overtake life and make it a reality.
Adults alienate childhood by oppressing it, yet at the same time they give it a meaning. For the child, the adult presents – makes present for it – what it will become, by the spontaneous process of maturing and through its own conscious and deliberate efforts. Among the limitless number of possibilities – the whorehouse of possibilities, as Valéry put it – the adult is the ‘real’, the inevitable realization. Without the adult, the child could never leave the limitlessness which would become its own limit. It would not become ‘someone’, this particular someone as opposed to someone else. It would become imprisoned in infantilism (which is what people who have difficulty choosing and back away from choices – from adulthood – unwittingly choose). By failing to realize any possibilities, by failing to realize itself in its childhood and adolescence, the child or the adolescent would lapse from the ‘real’.

Thus the adult inflicts on the child the necessity of a becoming and a future. He does not offer the child only a spectacle, but also a pressing requirement and a participation. The child imitates, and by imitating becomes itself. Thus for the child, the father arouses the ambivalence which psychoanalysts have discovered but which, as they have perhaps failed to understand, has roots far deeper than psychology, roots which are sociological as much as they are psychological, but have a deeper reality than that encompassed by sociology. If we must give this process a name, let us call it ‘anthropological’, but bearing in mind the reservations we have already expressed about this term. Parents, the mother and the father, ‘are’ the contradiction of becoming; they confront the child with becoming and, by doing so, place it in a contradictory situation. The father is the possible impossibility which is revealed through the child’s present moment and transfixes it; he is what the child will become, what it cannot ‘be’ and what it cannot become without disappearing as a child, without negating and superseding itself. The father is what is nearest and what is furthest away, intimate and inaccessible, the self and the other, threatening it and making it fruitful. Like it or not, the father brings the adult into childhood and the child into adulthood, and the only real world there is – a cruelly real one – into fairyland. He imposes inevitable but creative choices, mutilations and sacrifices. In return, the father will himself also disappear during the realization of his child, who, as if under some magic spell, will find it impossible not to wish for this disappearance. The father will grow old and die; the child will grow up, taking its father’s place. Thus it is obliged to imitate the model, identifying with the ‘image’, with the representation it has of its father, fearing him, rejecting him, even feeling hatred towards him and wishing he would die, but deeply aware of how wrong such feelings are. Thus the dialectical relation between age
groups subsumes what Freud and the Freudians have tried to establish, but includes something else as well: the dialectic of possibilities in the field of individual and social consciousness – that is, the semantic field.

On the other hand, for the adult, the child is a moving expression of what he was, what he no longer is, but what he still bears within himself, and makes it a presence. For the adult, the child is an unbearable and wonderful reminder of undefined possibilities, but it is also the arrival of new possibilities which the adult never knew when he was young. The child represents original freshness and naivety (but not in the cosmological sense as fetishized by decadent romanticism). The adult can draw pleasure from what he does and what he is, but this pleasure bears the limitations of what he is. He can go beyond these limitations, but only to a certain extent, by externalizing himself in the horizon of dreams, art, ideology or politics. In a past which is ever-present but always superseded, the child tells maturity about its own decrepitude. It is a sacred yet an accursed privilege, a privilege enjoyed by adolescence too. The adult devotes himself to the child, and the child condemns him: to stupidity, to self-importance, to reason, to death. Without this condemnation, the adult would be nothing more than the ‘real’, weighty and overpowering. Without children, the adult is reduced to a fait accompli. For the adult, the child is the impossible possibility, which gives the present its human substantiality and renders the real less narrow, without ideological illusion but not without cruelty.

And so, as men grow old, childhood is like the punishment for their weakness and their powerlessness. The child is like their double – full of promise, but pushing its elders beyond the generation of the father and the mother towards their end. For this reason a curious complicity exists between very young children and their parents’ parents, a complicity built upon anxiety and concern. To grandparents, childhood means the future and the perpetuation of the group, of the family and of society. Impossibilities and possibilities go together, yet they contradict one another irresolvably. But I do not see that as being the mutual interaction of determined and more or less well ‘structured’ realities, nor do I see it as a game of reflections and mirrors between individuals and their consciousness. I see it as movements in the field of possibilities: the dialectic of the possible and the impossible. Nor do I see it as a question of consciousness and the unconscious, except perhaps relatively, with one level of consciousness subsumed by or implying another. I would add to the dialectical movements in the field of possibilities those movements which take place in a more restricted and more clearly polarized field,
namely the expressive and signifying field (symbols, signs, signals). And finally, for the individual and for the group, there is the one possibility which is always there: death, that ever-present threat. But equally, as long as the individual and the group are afraid of it as a possibility, and struggle to defend themselves, to defy it and to go on living, it is an impossibility. By having children, the individual has opted for his own survival in the social group; it is a double challenge thrown to death, which elevates the existence of the group above that of individuals and interindividual relations. And God? Well, yes, he is possible.

Mr A (flabbergasted): What? These are just paradoxes!

Mr B (icily): An all-knowing and all-powerful God is perfectly possible, because knowledge and power exist. The Good Lord is possible, because goodness exists. It is because of that, and precisely because of that, that he does not exist—or, if the expression ‘God is dead’ means anything, no longer exists. Since he is possible, he should be present *hic et nunc*, in person. But he isn’t here, or there, *hic et nunc*. I insist that he should be perfectly present, near and not far away, palpable, intelligible, given and not lost. Since he is not a presence but a possibility, it must be because he does not exist. Could we say that he is dead, because men killed him in order to live, after first defying him, taking the devil as a symbol and a metaphor for this defiance? Perhaps, but it’s not very important. My dear friend, what I’m doing is turning the ontological argument on its head. Because God is possible, he is impossible. I’m giving the declaration ‘God is dead’ its full meaning. The dialectic of the possible and the impossible allows me to do so. The supreme *impossible possibility*, the foundation of tragedy, is death or nothingness. The supreme *possible impossibility*, the basis of nihilism, is the absolute, the sacred, transcendence, being, beauty, alas, and everything which died. God is merely another name for death, its anagram. As soon as I know this, I have superseded nihilism.

Mr A: You seem to have learned this little speech by heart. Now own up, you’ve recited it from memory, haven’t you . . . ?

Mr B: I can’t fool you, can I? Well, yes, it’s true, I’ve thought about it so much that I know it by heart.

Mr A: And you still maintain that it’s not a philosophy lesson?

Mr B: I do. Have I convinced you?
Mr A: Um . . . not entirely, despite your impassioned delivery.

Mr B: In other words – not at all.

Mr A: Well . . . a little.

Mr B: Come along now. Either you love me, or you love me not. Make your mind up, or you’ll spend the rest of your life just pulling petals off daisies. In any case, all this was merely a prelude. Let me begin. . . .
Notes

Introduction

1. Like the exhibition on the origins of contemporary art in 1961 in the Musée d’art moderne in Paris.
2. Texts by Marx, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Le Corbusier, etc., quoted below.

First Prelude

1. (Trans.) Maieutic: the Socratic method of eliciting knowledge by a series of questions and answers (from the Greek word for midwifery). It is sometimes used as a synonym for dialectic.
2. V. Jankélévitch, L’ironie ou la bonne conscience, PUF 1950.
3. See L. Gernet, Le génie grec dans la religion, p. 382.
4. In our opinion the best overview of the enigma of Socrates is in M. de Magalhaes-Vilhena’s Socrate.
6. (Trans.) Raymond Queneau’s work explores the humorous potential of verbal experimentation, the best example of which is arguably his Exercices de style (1947), where the same brief incident is presented in a hundred different (and mostly absurd) ‘styles’. Zazie dans le métro (1959) is written entirely in Parisian demotic eye-dialect. See Zazie, trans. B. Wright, John Calder, London 1982.
7. (Trans.) Lefebvre first presented his theory of moments in his autobiography, La somme et le reste (1959). It was to be a central theme for the Situationists in the years leading up to 1968.
14. (Trans.) Khrushchev presented this celebrated report denouncing Stalin to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956. The French
Communist Party was thrown into disarray by it (some leading figures denouncing it as a forgery), and Lefebvre's own response to it was instrumental in his expulsion from the Party in 1958.

15. (Trans.) The punctuation of the original would indicate that this 'reply' occupies the remainder of the Prelude.


19. The following anecdote may be appropriate: I rediscovered Marxist irony – both subjective and objective – one evening in Budapest, around 1950. Someone was quietly talking to me about this and that, and quite by chance (and without even smiling) they came out with the fact that the Politburo had just issued a directive regulating the amount of time members should applaud. Apparently a speaker had quoted Stalin, and nobody had dared to be the first to stop clapping.


Second Prelude


Third Prelude

1. A part of this proposed chapter appears in my Descartes, Cahiers de Royaumont, 157, no. 2, Editions de Minuit.

2. (Trans.) References to Don Giovanni and Kreisleriana respectively.

3. (Trans.) A reference to Sartre and to his play Le Diable et le bon dieu.

4. (Trans.) Restif de la Bretonne (1784–1806) was an author of peasant stock whose novels dealt with rural and urban working-class life.


6. (Trans.) Jansenius and Saint Cyran originated the doctrine of Jansenism, which influenced French society and literature for much of the seventeenth century. It repudiated free will, and asserted the importance of predestination and divine grace.

7. (Trans.) Lefebvre may have been thinking of Arthur Miller's play on the subject, The Crucible (1952).

8. (Trans.) Jean Eiffel specialized in drawings of angels, saints and other holy personages, in comic postures. For Queneau, see above, First Prelude, Note 6.

Fourth Prelude

1. (Trans.) Lefebvre had published a study on Rabelais some years previously: Rabelais, Les Editions françaises réunies, Paris 1955.
2. Abundancism was a theory developed by Jacques Duboin and his school. Duboin was Prime Minister during the Popular Front. A study of the newspaper L'Événement would be most revealing about this ideology and its dissemination.

3. (Trans.) Zhdanov was a leading Stalinist theoretician in Russia in the 1940s.

4. In Ideologie und Utopia. There is a good account of this in R. Ruyer's L'Utopie et ses utopies (pp. 53–4), an excellent book, though it limits itself to history and somewhat underestimates utopian socialism, in particular the work of Fourier and its influence on Marx and Engels.

Fifth Prelude

1. (Trans.) In his autobiography La somme et le reste, Lefebvre describes the 'moment' when he was looking at a Basque cross in a village in South-West France and was suddenly struck with a vision of it as the sun crucified. It came to represent for him all the repressive forces of his background: 'all the devotions, the bigotries, the pruderies, the unhealthy loathing of all things sexual. . . . I would like to call an encounter like this a "moment". It has affected my entire life. . . . From that day forward, or rather, from that crucial moment, I began to put Christianity on trial' (La somme et le reste, La Nef, Paris 1959, pp. 242 ff.). He goes on to describe how his fascination with the 'solar cross' and what it might symbolize gradually turned his hatred for the region of his birth into an intellectual interest which was to lead him towards rural sociology. See below, Seventh Prelude, Note 1.

Sixth Prelude

1. (Trans.) It was a long-standing tradition in France that after they had finished their apprenticeship, workers would 'tour' the country, usually on foot, before taking up permanent employment.

Seventh Prelude

1. (Trans.) A few geographical details may be useful here. Lefebvre was born in Hagetmau, in what is now the département of Les Landes, just north of the Basque Pyrenees. He left the area at thirteen, but returned during the war, when his Resistance activities put him in contact with peasant communities in the valley of Campan, in the Western Pyrenees. From that point on he became increasingly involved in rural sociology, and this in turn was to lead him towards his theories on urbanism and the production of space. In this respect his discovery of the new oil wells and refineries at Lacq, near Pau, and the new town which was built as an adjunct to it (Mourenx), was, like the vision of the 'crucified sun', a pivotal 'moment'.

2. See Simondon, Mode d'existence de l'objet technique, p. 253: 'The relation with the technical object can come into effect only in so far as it manages to produce the collective, interindividual reality we call transindividual . . .'.

Ninth Prelude

1. (Trans.) Jacques-Yves Cousteau's film about underwater exploration, *Le Monde du silence* (The World of Silence), which won the *Palme d’or* at Cannes in 1956, would certainly be an excellent example of the phenomenon Lefebvre is describing.


3. Following a tradition shared by Marxist thought and French (Bergsonian) philosophy, we are using the concept of the *thing* pejoratively. In the very first edition of my *Matérialisme dialectique* (1938) I used the word ‘reification’ to indicate the extreme form of *alienation* in preference to *chosification* ['thingifying' – (Trans.): H. Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, Jonathan Cape, London 1958].

4. Intentionally or not, philosophy always tends to unify determinations. Witness present-day phenomenology and existentialism, which try to equate the ‘semantic field’ with praxis and with nature. They sidetrack the methodological concept which we are using here of *level* in the distinction between symbols, images, signs and signals - between discourse, experience, praxis and nature, etc.

We have already introduced the principle of double determination several times. At this point we would like to emphasize its general methodological character (which must not be confused with *ambiguity*). It derives from an observation and a theory. In representations, the unity of distinct concepts (including those which have the most objective bases – mind and matter, for example) extends to infinity. Unity would come as a result of the achievement of total knowledge and unity between the relative and the absolute. However, a concrete, present unity is achievable in praxis – in particular, at privileged moments – but this unity is soon shattered by representations.


   In a book which was published after I wrote these pages (Marx, *penseur de la technique*, Editions de Minuit 1961), Kostas Axelos offers another interpretation of Marx: a technological one. Axelos is right to consider Marx in relation to the extraordinary development of technology in the modern world. He is right to show how open Marxism is, and how open it must remain. However, the method leads Axelos to ask questions which Marx could never have asked himself.

9. On this crucial point, Axelos's arguments seem solid.


11. (Trans.) This is Lefebvre's first indication that this 'modern woman' is class-specific, and it is parenthesized. However, his portrait of her is scarcely comprehensible if the reader does not see it in a specific historical, cultural and class context. This woman of the late 1950s is surely the redoubtable French *bourgeoise*, to be seen perhaps in the Jeanne Moreau of Louis Malle’s *Les Amants* (1958) or, in a younger version, in the Macha Merill of Godard's *Une Femme mariée* (1964). She predates the women’s movement, and cannot be identified with her Anglo-Saxon sister, the middle-class lady, with her tradition of Church and Women's
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Institute, whose counterpart can be seen a decade and a half earlier in the character portrayed by Celia Johnson in Brief Encounter (1945). At any rate, it is inconceivable that this 'modern woman' is intended as an archetype for 1960s women in general.


Tenth Prelude

1. (Trans.) In the original, the distinction is between l'homme jeune and le jeune homme.

Eleventh Prelude

1. (Trans.) In modern French the Latin masculine noun modus becomes mode, which means 'mode' or 'modality' in the masculine, but also 'fashion' in the feminine. This explains Lefebvre's later point – linguistically, at any rate – about the feminization of the word 'fashion'.
2. (Trans.) See below, Twelfth Prelude, Note 38.
5. Ibid., p. 392.
6. On the interpretation of artistic creation and of painting as music, see Baudelaire's Salon of 1846 [ibid., pp. 47–107]. On Baudelaire's vague and repressed Hegelianism, see Mon cœur mis à nu, in Oeuvres complètes, Pléiade, p. 652.
7. (Trans.) See Note 1 above.
9. I trust no one will object that this interpretation is not in line with judgments I have expressed in the past. Yes, consistency is a virtue, but in a period of permanent upheaval it is impossible. And even if it is true, it is hardly an objection. At the very most it would be a malicious observation. The author bequeaths his former polemics to historical analysis, and in doing so he supersedes polemic.
10. Here we skip over some important milestones. 1917 was the year of Dadaism. It was also the year when Valéry started publishing again, after twenty-five years of purifying silence. Under the sign of Parca, the goddess of fate and moral purity, he undertook the mutual dissolution of the abstract and the concrete. [ (Trans.) A reference to Valéry's latter-day symbolist poem La Jeune Parque.] Another milestone of prime importance would be Le Corbusier's Charted 'Athenes (1942), which attempted to make the notion of harmony concrete; but that would be for a more detailed historical study.
11. This strange movement has distant antecedents: Barrès (at the end of the previous period), several of the Surrealists, Aragon, etc. Today, Beckett seems faithful to himself, and determined to push negation as far as he can within literature and language.
12. This point of view has been expressed very clearly by the talented American
sociologist D. Lerner, and specifically in a lecture he delivered at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris (March 1961).

13. They have been revived in Kostas Axelos's remarkable book *Marx penseur de la technique*.

14. There is surely no need for us to quote again the many texts by Marx and by Lenin on the withering away of the state. Suffice it to remind ourselves of the indissoluble unity they saw between dictatorship by the proletariat, extended democracy, and the withering away of the state.


17. A cumulative process may obey a law of exponential growth. But saturation factors modify the graph, and substitute a so-called 'logistical' curve for accelerated (exponential) growth.

18. In his *Marx penseur de la technique*, Kostas Axelos interprets Marx's thought slightly differently. In our view, Marx effectively defined the role of techniques and technology, but he was right, for his time, not to see them as the motive and essence of development.


20. The process of accumulation is not a thing or an ensemble of things, but human power externalized, materialized, *objectivised*. It is therefore not connected with the 'practico-inert', as J.-P. Sartre maintains, nor is it explained by the Structuralist theory of signification and signifying totalities. M. Fourastié explains the accelerated (exponential) character of certain processes well, but he tends to extrapolate — as, for example, when he attributes this characteristic to the hourly productivity of labour. See *La civilisation de 1960, Que sais-je?*, PUF 1950, pp. 97–8.


25. Lenin, *Matérialisme et empirio-critique*, Editions Sociales, p. 343. [(Trans.) The particular chapter from which this quotation is taken, 'A propos de la dialectique', does not figure in the 1962 Moscow translation of *Matérialism and Empirio-Criticism.*]


28. (Trans.) The original phrase, 'l'amour est à réinventer', is Rimbaud's (*Une Saison en enfer*).

**Twelfth Prelude**

1. Stendhal, *Racine and Shakespeare*, p. 39. [(Trans.) Stendhal was the pseudonym of Henri Beyle. The fame of his novels, *Scarlet and Black* (1830) and *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), has perhaps overshadowed his interest as critic and theorist. He himself called his beliefs about the pursuit of happiness 'Beylism'.]
2. (Trans.) Largely because of the Napoleonic Wars, the French romantic movement did not get off the ground until 1820. Lamartine’s *Méditations poétiques*, published in that year, is regarded as the first example of French romantic poetry. The English equivalent, *Lyrical Ballads*, appeared in 1798.


4. See Hugo’s *Odes* (1822), Lamartine’s *Méditations*, etc.; also Stendhal’s *Lettre sur Hugo* (1823).


6. (Trans.) The original is ‘courage civil’.


8. Ibid., p. 69.

9. There are several very precise texts in Guillefovic (Seghers 1954), presented by P. Daix. In particular, on p. 114: ‘From things to men . . . A new freedom, born from the renewal of that most rigorous of forms, the sonnet.’ Daix’s concise introduction saves us from having to quote from hundreds of articles which have appeared in various newspapers and periodicals.

10. See *Racine and Shakespeare*, p. 104. Stendhal defines taste by quoting Goethe. Taste is not the same thing as creative genius, but it can teach it many invaluable lessons. Even ‘mirror painters’, such as Poussin, need good taste (ibid., p. 91).

11. Ibid., p. 33.

12. Ibid.


14. We should add that in France in 1961, we have not reached the point where a joke can be too good to make us laugh, because we can think about the misfortunes in store for the joker! We are still at the point where the slightest witicism about people in authority is regarded as clever.

15. And the political criterion has not helped to clarify matters, from one side of the spectrum or the other. See ‘Elsa Triolet contre la critique de gauche’, *Les Lettres françaises*, 28 January 1960. The so-called left-wing critics may put aestheticism above politics, but this is nevertheless a political criterion which works in favour of conformism.


17. (Trans.) A paraphrase of the opening line of Mallarmé’s *Tombeau d’Edgar Poe* ‘Enfin tel qu’en lui-même l’éternité le change’.


19. Ibid., p. 18.

20. See *Humanisme et terreur*, notably the preface, p. 19; also the preface to *Signes*, etc.

21. (Trans.) While retaining the general sense it has in English, the word *drame* also has a specialized meaning in French, referring to a class of dramatic works intermediate between tragedy and comedy, and characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French theatre. Its first exponent and theorist was Diderot.

22. See ‘Le Satyr’ in *La Légende des siècles*.


24. Ibid., p. 95.

25. Ibid., p. 27.

26. In the eighteenth century, discussions on nature and its relation with ‘society’ or ‘civilization’, i.e. culture, appear to have been an extremely important cultural fact and sociological phenomenon.

28. Ibid., p. 19.

29. Ibid., p. 21.

30. Comparisons could be made between Stendhal's criticism of classicism and Minkowski's recent theory about 'morbid rationalism', a form of schizophrenia which sees everything geometrically, and absorbs temporal duration into spatiality. See also the work of M. Gabel. Classicism reifies time, immersing it in a highly structured, symmetrical temporality, which is fundamentally architectural. Neoclassicism goes even farther. In its wish to control time, it fetishizes and kills it.

31. Racine and Shakespeare, p. 16.

32. However, see Hegel: 'But just as art has its "before" in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an "after".... For art has still a limit in itself and therefore passes over into higher forms of consciousness.' (Hegel, Aesthetics, trans. T. Knox, Oxford 1975, vol. 1, p. 102.)


34. Stendhal, 'Vie de Mozart', ibid.

35. (Trans.) Pigault-Lebrun and Mercier were popular authors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.


37. Rousseau, article on Imitation in Dictionnaire de la musique. Among the works in which we hope to develop some of the themes of this Prelude will be a study dealing with the musical debates of the eighteenth century, and their links with the concept of nature.

38. (Trans.) Rameau published his Traité de l'harmonie in 1722. He was always in the forefront of the often acrimonious debates about music which were a feature of eighteenth-century French cultural life. His orchestral music was associated with the dance (opera-ballets such as Les Indes galantes), and was characterized by rich harmonies and an exploratory use of instrumental timbres, which perhaps explains Stendhal's complaint about 'noise' referred to on p. 268.


40. J. Duvignaud, Pour entrer dans le XXe siècle, pp. 298–9.

41. Myth differs from symbol through its use of mythic narrative. Therefore we will not situate it in the 'semantic field', which it influences via symbols and images. Generally, mythic narrative deals with power and its social conflicts.

42. This theory of the imagination is historical and sociological. It was presented for the first time in connection with Nietzsche (Nietzsche, ESI 1939, pp. 157 ff.). It differs both from psychological theories (which define the image as something perceived) and from specifically sociological, ethnographic or anthropological theories. It also differs from Sartre's existential theories, which situate the imagination outside of the 'world'. We do not intend to deal here with the relations between the theory of the imagination and that of the semantic field (signs as symptoms, anticipatory images, etc.).

43. Scientifically, it is 'redundant'. We do not intend here to repeat the precise mathematical explanations offered by harmonic analysis, information and entropy theory, the theory of games and operators, or the theory of 'event spaces', etc.

44. Shakespeare, Richard II, Act III Scene ii.

46. See the studies by Baron Seillère, which for the time being we would not wish to refute.

47. (Trans.) Charles Maurras (1868–1952) was a neoclassical critic whose polemical writings attacking romanticism have been overshadowed by his editorial functions on the notorious right-wing periodical *L’Action française*. He was arrested as a collaborator in 1944.


50. Ibid., p. 520.

51. Ibid., p. 521.

52. Ibid., p. 526.

53. Ibid., p. 522.

54. Ibid., pp. 527–8.


56. Both Stendhal and Balzac wrote about this dual obsession of the time: secret societies and codes. As for dandyism, it represents only a small part of lived romantic utopianism, and in some respects was a parody of it.

57. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot*, trans. R. Robertson, Oxford University Press 1992, p. 83. The link between Hoffmann’s fantastic stories and romantic music (Schumann) is well known, but as yet it has not been fully examined. A. Bégui’s admirable *L’Ame romantique et le Rêve* is full of ideas and quotations, but rather sidetracks music. (See, however, his remarks on Jean-Paul Richter, pp. 170–75.) Novalis’s texts on *Les Méditations*, and Hoffmann’s, are more important and meaningful than Goethe’s (the conclusion of *Faust* Part Two, etc.). Delacroix’s essays on ‘musical painting’ would be appropriate here, as would Baudelaire’s, etc.


60. Ibid., pp. 246–7.


62. Ibid., p. 292.

63. Ibid., pp. 131, 133.

64. Ibid., pp. 302–3.

65. Ibid., p. 304.

66. Certain romantic contradictions and confusions have led to contradictions and confusions about romanticism and the romantic period among critics and ‘public’ alike. For example: ‘Beylism’ in the 1880s and Paul Bourget’s essays on contemporary literature. Stendhal is rediscovered precisely at the moment when the individual begins to lose all hope of developing fully, but decides to fulfil himself nevertheless via *arrivisme*. Here Beylism is equated with snobbery, its antithesis.

67. Marx emphasized the presence of this idea in the philosophy of Helvétius. The contradiction had surfaced in the polemical confrontation between Diderot and Helvétius, and also in the debates between Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists concerning Rameau’s aesthetic. On the first point, see H. Lefebvre, *Diderot*, Editions Sociales 1949. We will be addressing the second point in a study in progress.


69. Ibid., p. 214.

70. Does this introduce the entropy theory accepted by certain ‘Informationists’? Not exactly. It is not the loss of information which produces the
modification studied in the semantic field, it is first and foremost the prevalence of signals, and then the demotion of symbols. If symbols were inexhaustible, they would continue to polarize the field. – Moreover, massive injections of information are not enough to counteract the depletion of informational energy. Something else is required: the creation of living forms, or just simply, creation.

71. See Martineau, Motivation et publicité (guide de la stratégie publicitaire).

72. In this study we have paid a considerable amount of attention to sociology in order to allow us our critique of sociologism. Despite its appearance of clarity, sociological vocabulary is frequently confused, and an analysis of a philosophical kind (although it is not really a question of philosophy) might help to clarify it. Alain Touraine’s article in Esprit (in an issue devoted to leisure, June 1959) is bursting with ideas on ‘participation’ in mass leisure, mass culture, and the values of the global society, but what exactly do they mean? Because this culture and its values are pure spectacle, there can be no participation. They are looked at.


75. (Trans.) The three terms are in English in the original.


77. (Trans.) Come Back Africa (1959), directed by Lionel Rogosin, dealt with the effects of apartheid on Black South Africans. Marcel Carné’s Les Tricheurs (1958) was a moralizing ‘exposé’ of the mores of young middle-class Parisians, the ‘cheats’ of the title.

78. (Trans.) An apparent – and puzzling – reference to Eluard’s Mourir de ne pas mourir. Eluard was neither a mystic nor a nihilist.

79. (Trans.) The opening words of the unofficial Occitan ‘national anthem’.

80. (Trans.) In the words of Mark Poster, the PCF’s ‘intellectual hatchet men’.

81. (Trans.) Front de Libération nationale, the Algerian radical Muslim independence movement, and political wing of the Algerian Army of National Liberation. Algeria was to win independence from France in 1962, shortly after Introduction to Modernity was published.

82. (Trans.) Stendhal dedicated Scarlet and Black (in English) ‘To the Happy Few’.

83. (Trans.) An eminent mathematician and information theorist, Mandelbrot was to become an important figure in the 1970s with his theory of fractal geometry.

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