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Return to Literature. A Manifesto in Favour of Theory and against Methodologically Reactionary Studies (Cultural Studies etc.)

Giovanni Bottioli

Abstract • What is literature for us today? And what will become of it in the next few years? Our era only seems willing to recognize the complexity of the field of science; whereas as far as literature is concerned, it is still thought that a rigorous training is not necessary and many deceive themselves into thinking that it is possible to do without the analytical tools created in the twentieth century and more recently thanks to theory.

The refusal of theory is justified by the most tenacious prejudices, or simply by bad faith. It is believed (or some pretend to believe) that literary theory coincides with the years of structuralism, with the primacy of linguistics, and with the thesis of the intransitivity of language.

Reality is quite different. Literary theory is a hybrid space where linguistics, rhetoric, philosophy and the theories of desire merge and interweave. In this space, which undergoes constant renewal, literature is understood to be an intellectual and emotive experience, and an irreplaceable source of knowledge. Literary texts are studied as dynamic objects that are able to cross the borders of the era in which they were produced and enter the “great time” (as Bakhtin called it). However, a text can only expand, like the Japanese flowers that Proust spoke about at the beginning of the *Recherche*, if it is immersed in the water of good interpretations. And good interpretations are not infinite as Derrida and the followers of reception theory believed. Only doxa is infinite.

Literature is a way of thinking. It offers the opportunity for a complex mental experience that no algorithm could ever describe or envisage. By creating characters with flexible identities, literature describes the human condition from the viewpoint of non-coincidence with oneself. It addresses all individuals inviting them to understand their higher possibilities.

Yet these possibilities, the investigation of which is where the very vocation of literature lies, have always encountered enormous obstacles. The difficulty in understanding and analyzing those virtually expanding multilateral objects that are literary texts has caused most scholars to limit themselves to reductive and peripheral investigations. This type of research should be called contextualism. It has presented

itself in different versions: the history of literature in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, cultural studies (in other words the anti-theory) in the last few decades; but also in the form of an unlimited intertextualism (Derrida), far removed from any social-historic interest. However, all types of contextualism share a common attitude: they deny the individuality of the text, they ignore (or fear) the “labyrinth of linkages” (Tolstoy) that form it, its complexity and its beauty. Therefore, they take refuge in the contexts: the nation, the class, the race, the gender, the ideology, etc. or in the set of texts by the same author or by other authors. The inability to analyze and interpret literature has caused enormous damage. Contextualism destroys literature. These considerations are addressed not only to professors, but also to students in the hope that this damage is not (or will not become) irreversible. We can no longer postpone the rebellion against contextualism and the University requires innovation. The conceptually and methodologically reactionary studies must be fought, even when they masquerade as good intentions and try to hide their intellectual poverty behind stereotypes of ideology.

Keywords • Literary Theory; Interpretation; Identity; Flexibility; Cultural Studies

Ledizioni 

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I. The University and “Muggle Studies”

In the third book of the Harry Potter saga, Hermione Granger tells her friends that she has enrolled on a course of “Muggle Studies.” Hermione knows full well that it is not a particularly interesting course and that it is certainly not comparable with the one on the “Defence against the dark arts” or other courses teaching magic. Nobody goes to Hogwarts to study mainly “Muggle Studies”! Hermione will attend the course simply because she is a conscientious student and wants to achieve as comprehensive an education as possible.

What possible choices are open to a student enrolling at University to learn about literature, in Europe and in the United States? How disheartening it would be to discover that most of the courses that the student could attend were the equivalent of the “Muggle Studies.” The student would like to follow lessons that bring him closer to the magic of literature. In order not to lose that magic, he will have to learn to defend himself against “the clear arts,” because literature is a dense and complex language. “Plain poets do not last,” said Eugenio Montale. “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree,” stated Ezra Pound.

This is not the only possible and entirely valid definition of those multilateral “objects,” the literary texts: some great authors, and some essayists, have advanced others, taking stances that highlight aspects which are as essential as semantic density. How are we to assess this multitude of definitions? As an imperfect, but temporary condition? Would it be possible sooner or later to reach a wording capable of reflecting and reuniting all the essential aspects? But—and the objection is entirely legitimate—is there an essence of literature? And if it does not exist, how are we to judge the attempts to identify it and describe it?

What justifies the subheading of this manifesto? Can we select and reject unsuitable and erroneous approaches? I believe so and it seems to me that this conviction is widely shared: the differences of opinion concern the types of error, not the fact that one approach or another is considered, if not entirely wrong, at least simplistic. A student enrolling in a department of literary studies is guided by a desire for knowledge, and by a series of expectations. First and foremost, he expects the department to keep the promises that are in implicit in its very name: he will study literature! And, as literature, which is so difficult to define in its variable and intricate “essence,” consists of *texts*, he intends to dedicate his energy mainly to the analysis of texts: to those texts that have already aroused his enthusiasm, but whose richness and complexity, he knows, have escaped him, and to other texts, in which he has perceived a mysterious and impenetrable beauty due to their hermeticism, or which have intimidated him owing to their vastness: endless works that present remote worlds; how can the distance be crossed? Will the effort they require initially be transformed into pleasure?

He will come to acknowledge with some surprise, although such a feeling is bound to fade as imposed habits and prevailing conformism are difficult to escape from, that the University does not keep its promises and that in the department of literature students do

not analyze literature. *It is not the texts that are studied, but practically only the contexts!* The works are related to the historical, cultural, ideological time in which they were produced: I will refer to this approach as *contextualism*, which explains a text by giving precedence to the context of the production, and I will try to describe the different forms it assumes within the framework of literary studies. In fact, the differences between the old and the new contextualism should not be overlooked: we must learn to recognize contextualism that presents itself as intertextuality and therefore, at least in appearance, seems to give precedence to the texts.

In many ways, contextualism corresponds to the “historical sickness” described by Nietzsche in his *Second Untimely Meditation*: modernity is characterized by a boom in historical studies which leads to an impoverishment of the life forces. History resembles a river that constantly dries up: its flow of water becomes buried in erudition, in the sterile cult of a past that has become a box of relics; or in the homage to unrepeatable feats, celebrated with a hyperbolic and empty adjectivization; but also in a destructive attitude, in what could be defined as the ideology of the present, in other words in the conviction of an inferiority of the past (represented in the last decades by those who believe that the *politically correct* may compensate for the lack of creativity, talent and stylistic invention). An ideological factionalism that Nietzsche was able to sense and describe ahead of time.

2. A First Picture of the Contextualists—The Literary Text as a Constant Greatness

Contextualism impoverishes the aesthetic experience and, thus, the vital relationship with the work of art. History, whether it be the cult of the past or the emphasizing of the present, becomes the enemy of life. Nowadays, we speak more of *culture* than of *history*: but this change of terminology cannot hide a continuity of approaches that has characterized our Universities for the last two centuries. How can the dominance of contextual studies be explained? How is such a stubborn and detrimental shortsightedness possible? In my opinion, the starting point of any answer must lie in the complexity of literature, but also, paradoxically, in the apparent accessibility of most texts. In contrast with this illusion, Proust stated that “Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère” (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 305). This applies to all beautiful books, even those written in our mother tongue. Here is another truth regarding literature, but we generally remember it only when we tackle hermetic texts, when we read Mallarmé, Eliot, or Kafka, not when we deal with Balzac or Tolstoy. It is to Tolstoy himself that we owe one of the truest and most stimulating definitions of literary works, each of which is “a labyrinth of linkages” (“labirint sceplenij”; qtd. in Erlich 241).

From the aphoristic affirmations of Pound, Proust and Tolstoy we can derive a more than adequate picture of the contextualists. The contextualist is a scholar who (a) ignores or underestimates semantic density; (b) believes that the literary work is transparent, and that any opacity is caused by linguistic evolution or by a deliberate reticence on the part of the author; (c) has not the least intention of penetrating the labyrinth of linkages constituting a literary work. He will choose a distant observation point, which will enable him to offer great analogies (between literary forms and societies) or, more aggressively, to point out the ideological prejudices even in the greatest writers.

The combination of (a), (b) and (c) characterizes the most common type of contextualism, although partial adherence to the three characteristics should not be excluded. It is now of fundamental importance to realize *what is the conception of the literary work adopted, whether knowingly or not, by the contextualists*. I will explain immediately afterwards why such a conception is to be considered outdated from a

theoretical and methodological viewpoint. The reader will judge whether good ideological intentions and reference to values that are undoubtedly commendable (as far as literary criticism is concerned, which wanted to defend women, homosexuals, racial differences, etc.) can justify the poverty of contextualism and lessen the enormous damage that it has provoked.

Now it is necessary to ask if contextualism is a theory or simply an ideology. It can be considered from both points of view: it is certainly an ideology, to the extent that by this term reference is made to a discourse that tends towards simplification, to the rarefaction of concepts and makes use of a few crass distinctions. However, it is worth examining contextualism as a theory to highlight the principles which, for the most part, remain implicit: then again, the contextualist feels absolutely no need to make them clear, as he would be forced to recognize the dogmatic and mummified character of the principles or, if we prefer of the theses guiding his work.

The most important and most dogmatic of these ideas affirms that the literary text (like any work of art) is a *constant greatness*. Its meaning is stable and governed essentially by the *intentio auctoris*. Yet this governing action does not imply an absolute control: as a king belongs to his people, so does an author belong to his age, and he cannot help but reflect it in his work, which, therefore, performs the function of conveying a certain culture and its ideological components. The work reflects a precise historical context that subsequent generations can, in any case, understand in greater depth, unmasking the latent ideologies: for example, in the titanism of Goethe's *Faust* the wish to dominate the world that characterizes the bourgeoisie and the future imperialist policy can be discerned. A literary text is not entirely explicit, as the theory of the *intentio auctoris* would seem to suggest: but its implicit dimension does not depend on the richness of the internal relations—as Tolstoy thought, and as we will see more clearly later on—, but rather on what we may call “the involuntary reflections of the historical-cultural situation” in which it was produced. The prejudices that the author would have had difficulty avoiding (patriarchal conception, phallogocentrism, superiority of the white race, etc.) form a part of these reflections.

3. Rebellious Against Contextualism

As stated previously, contextualism is the methodological approach that has dominated literary studies in the West and continues to do so. Almost unopposed in the nineteenth century, the century of history, it was highly criticized in the twentieth century, the century of language, of the *linguistic turn*, but also the century of Freud and Heidegger. The rebellion against contextualism developed in three directions, which interlaced only partially and not always with satisfactory outcomes, and formed a heterogeneous field known as the *theory of literature*: a hybrid field of research which experienced a propitious phase in the nineteen sixties and the early nineteen seventies and which was then overshadowed by new forms of contextualism. The last decades have represented a phase of decline and backwardness, during which anti-theory has prevailed over theory. Could this trend be inverted? Could theory, good theory, occupy a prominent role in literary studies once again? I believe that this possibility must be considered a necessity, because *contextualism kills literature and destroys the very conditions of the aesthetic experience*. So rebellion is necessary. For the new generations, the possibility of enriching their educational background by assimilating the cognitive and emotive strength of literature depends on their ability to rebel against contextualism.

Will the criticism of contextualism be conducted exclusively in the name of theory? No, certainly not: if this were my conviction, I would not have started my discourse by quoting

some striking statements of great writers. The intuitions of Poe, Wilde, Flaubert, Proust, etc., are like flashes of lightning ripping through the darkness: but their light is in danger of going out too quickly, unless it is accompanied by analysis and criticism. Firstly, I would like to pay tribute to the research of those scholars who trusted in their “individual mixture” which combined linguistic and philological skills, refinement, sensitivity, etc. I am thinking of Auerbach, Thibaudet, Spitzer, Contini, to limit myself to scholars with an extraordinary subtlety in their analysis of style. Nothing can replace the lightness and fluidity of a glance that moves freely and agilely over the text and suddenly spots the telltale detail.

It was a great mistake to think that theory and explicit methodology would have rendered intuition useless and superfluous—and, in the same way, *intuitive* literary criticism. This is not the case: it would be like believing that instruments like the microscope, instant replay and the zoom make observation with the naked eye totally superfluous. The two methods of observation should be alternated and should swap results with each other.

But theory has become indispensable. Undoubtedly, this term refers to, or rather must refer to, a variety of perspectives and a work space, a perennial work in progress, where hypotheses are formulated, where instruments and models are built, tested, perfected and so on. Therefore, I propose Barthes’ conception again: *theory* means “vision + techniques.” Good theory knows how to produce a toolkit.

4. Irrevocable Conquests: the Text as a Dynamic Greatness and Interpretation as “Conflictual Reading”

What do we know about literature? Still too little. We realized that the project of the Russian Formalists, which was to draw up a science of literature and reach an enunciation of laws, was too ambitious and spoilt by a positivist mentality. There are almost certainly no laws governing those languages, whose flexibility we should admire and whose freedom of construction appears virtually unlimited. It is in this sense that we can reread a list of suggestions that Borges and Bioy Casares ironically address to the aspiring writer, referring to a series of blatant, unforgivable mistakes that should be avoided by anyone intending to write a masterpiece. Here are some of the mistakes: cultivating projects that are too vast, for example a journey from Hell to Purgatory and then to Paradise as occurs in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; offering comparisons that are too schematic, for example between a tall, thin character and another small, fat character, as seen in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*; straying through interminable lists of day to day details as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*; writing excessively long sentences like Proust, etc. (I quote from memory). By avoiding mistakes of this type, an author can, without a doubt, write a masterpiece.

No rules, and certainly not such strict rules that a writer cannot poke fun at them. However, if we rely once again on the writers’ intelligence, we will have to agree that the exceptional freedom of invention is always accompanied by the need for rigour and by the awareness that one cannot abandon oneself to arbitrariness. For example, *Ulysses* may appear to be an “open” text, infinitely disposed towards expansion, to the inclusion of new details; this impression is undeniably justified, new sentences and new pages could have been added to those that we know of the 1922 edition. Yet there is an anecdote in Joyce’s life that offers us a different and crucial point of view: “He once told Frank Budgen that he had been working all day at two sentences of *Ulysses*: ‘Perfume of embraces all him assailed. With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore.’ When asked if he was seeking the *mot juste*, Joyce replied that he had the words already. What he wanted was a suitable order” (Tyndall 96).

Any material can be inserted in a book, and it is possible to plan a text whose organization is so free as to be able to embrace new additions at any time: a text that ends only because the author has chosen to end it, but whose ending could have been continually deferred. All this is true, but it is equally true that every possible development is accepted, by authors like Joyce, only on condition that it is subjected to a stylistic processing. Anyone failing to understand this *need* is destined to understand little about literature.¹

Perhaps we have found the right way to present theory: it does not aim to find strict laws or restrictions, even though it does not exclude from its secondary aims the recognition of certain *regularities* that are privileged from a taxonomic viewpoint. It was on the basis of such regularities that in the past the genres (epic, lyric, etc.) and the subgenres (adventure novel, historical novel, etc.) were distinguished. Regularities are not laws, as anyone who has even only read Hume should know: they do not prohibit irregularities, intermingling or hybridization. During the twentieth century, new taxonomies were added to the older ones mentioned above: we only have to think of those introduced by Genette in his narratological studies, etc. They are certainly not useless instruments. But orienting theory towards the construction of taxonomies means depriving it of its greatest potentialities. *Theory wishes to make the texts more intelligible* and, therefore, it wishes to investigate them in their complexity: it intends to throw light on their mechanisms and on their virtualities and not on general characteristics.

Hence, the questions posed by the Russian Formalists—“What does a text consist of? How does it work?”—are still completely legitimate as long as the first question is subordinated to the second, unlike what happened within the framework of Formalism itself and in many works of the structuralists: in order to answer the second question a *theory of interpretation* is needed, the lack of which is the great drawback of the aforementioned scholars. Yet, we must be fair to these authors and to their pioneering studies: raging against their limitations and the more outdated theories would be like denying the value of the theories of Copernicus and Galileo in relation to the subsequent developments in physics. Theory has its history made up of hypotheses and corrections, of accurate intuitions and mistakes.

As soon as one affirms the need for theory, it is essential to focus on what we can consider to be the indispensable conquests of a hybrid knowledge, in the best meaning of the adjective: the theory of literature is a space where more specific research encounters other knowledge and other perspectives. As previously mentioned, there are at least three great conceptual streams that converge in the theory of literature: *linguistics, theories of desire and philosophy* (not only aesthetics).

It is from this convergence that theory can recommence today, to offer new knowledge and an emotionally richer relationship with the texts. From the intersection of these fluxes, that we will examine in greater depth shortly below, two theses have emerged that must be considered as vital progress:

(a) the literary text is a dynamic greatness;

(b) the driving force of its dynamism is conflict: a text expands thanks to the conflictual plurality of its interpretations. It demands a *conflictual reading*.

The two theses are closely linked. Let us try to understand them better, starting from a basic communication process, for example the order “I’d like a coffee”; it is quite unlikely that the barman will answer by saying, “What do you mean?”. This does not happen because communication of this type is fully articulated, in other words it lacks density: it is produced and understood according to the same set of rules. In all these cases,

¹ Proust said that the truth begins in literature when the writer takes two different objects and unites them by means of “les anneaux nécessaires d’un beau style” (*A la recherche du temps perdu* vol. 3, *Le temps retrouvé*, 889).

understanding amounts to *decoding*. The receiver of the message does not make any inference whatsoever.

This example is a perfect illustration of the model of communication that can be traced back to Jakobson, who some believe has great importance for literary theory. Nothing could be further from the truth. The code model (as it is often called) represented a step back compared with the conception of Saussure,² and within the space of a few years, its inappropriateness would be underlined by the emergence of pragmatics: after the publication of Grice's famous article, *Logic and conversation*, it became apparent even to the strictest structuralists that to understand a message it is not enough to decode it: it is necessary to *make inferences*. This is also necessary in many situations of day-to-day life. Such a clarification is important because interpretation is, without doubt, an inferential activity: therefore, it is right to ask ourselves if there are mental operations that we perform only when we encounter a work of art.

We will return to the problem of interpretation shortly; now we must clarify the difference between the two conceptions of text. If the literary text were a *constant greatness*, the code model (or Jakobson's model) would still be substantially valid: the author would communicate his *intentio* using the same rules that the reader uses to understand it. In the act of communication the quantity of information remains constant; once the possible misunderstandings have been eliminated (an operation which, in principle, can always be performed), the addressee receives what the sender has conveyed to him: the meaning that he wanted to transmit, and "the involuntary reflections of the historical-cultural situation" (as we have called them), in other words the prejudices that he was unable (or unwilling) to avoid. Obviously, if the meaning of a text is a constant greatness, such prejudices may assume a significant importance, and condition the overall approach to the work. Thus, we have made a discovery, which for many is unexpected: amongst the most convinced supporters of that obsolete conception attributing a semantic stability to the literary text not only do we find the most traditional philologists, but also the representatives of *cultural studies*. While in the context of advanced literary theory Jakobson's model has lost all credibility, the contextualists continue to make use of it and would not, in fact, be able to refrain from doing so: if the text were a dynamic object, which expands thanks to interpretations, what importance would an author's prejudices have? Their significance would become irrelevant. On the contrary, once a work has been nailed to its context, the ideology can be voiced, a punitive animosity which delights in denigrating what is great. Accordingly, the pettiness of the accusations made against *The Tempest* or *Heart of Darkness* derives not only from *ressentiment* but also from an assumption of a theoretical nature, that is from the adherence to the old conception of the text as a constant greatness.

By contrast, those who are aware of the progress of literary theory (and of aesthetics) will have no doubt: *every work of art (worthy of this name) is a dynamic greatness*. It should be recalled that this definition had already been introduced in the nineteen thirties by Mukařovský: having stated that "the work of art itself is not in any way a constant greatness" (60), he invites us to distinguish between the work as an *artefact*, as the author composed it (and, in any case, in the most plausible version from a philological point of view), and the *virtual* component, that is to say the aesthetic object as it is interpretable.

This is the paradox of the work of art: on one hand it presents itself and it is an unmodifiable linguistic formation; on the other hand, it is transformed into the *time of the interpretation*. It does not simply concern an empirical temporality in which the reactions

² For Saussure the *langue* was a virtual system and not only a set of collective habits: only this second definition justifies the concept of code. And, above all, the *langue* is "the domain of articulations" (112): this is the most innovative of Saussure's definitions.

(sometimes contradictory) of the public of different historical periods follow on from each other, but of a temporality consisting of *good interpretations*, thanks to which only one work enters the “great time,” as Bakhtin called and defined it (*Reply to a question by ‘Noyvj mir’*). I will try to illustrate this concept with a diagram, which may perhaps help to take leave definitively of the code model and of semantic stability (and will allow us later to highlight Derrida’s pseudo-dynamism):

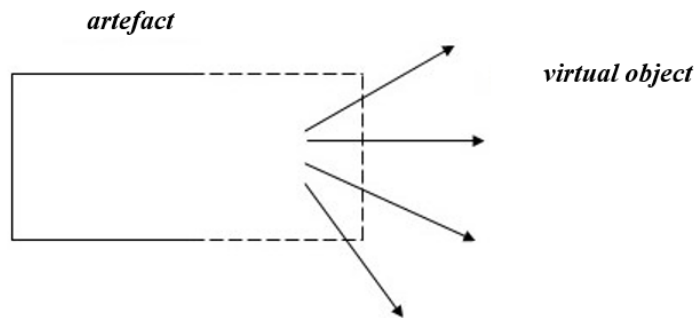


Fig. 1 – The artefact and the virtual object.

The continuous line represents the *artefact*, that is to say the stability of the text, insofar as it has been created “in such and such a way” by an author; the dotted line indicates the *virtuality*, the elasticity of the text, its openness to expansion thanks to good interpretations. However, every diagram has its limitations and may lead to misunderstandings: in this case, it seems to offer an irenic vision, while the interpretative dimension is conflictual. I preferred not to complicate or overload the diagram, but the reader should not forget that interpretation is, first and foremost, *articulation*, that is to say a segmentation of the text that does not allow itself to be conditioned by the one in which the artefact presents itself: the sentences, the paragraphs, the chapters, etc. Let us just think of how Barthes analyses *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, breaking the text down into *lexias*, that is to say into units of varying sizes (from the single word to a group of sentences, but also just part of a sentence). I would suggest the following thesis: *no interpretation without articulation*, which means that an interpretation, in the eminent meaning of the word, stems from an articulatory activity. Should this not be the case, the interpretation is traced back to its most banal meaning and as such consists of an injection of meaning. Injections of meaning are not in any way shunned by contextualists: unable to perform any analyses, they resort to generic statements.

Accordingly, let us try to investigate the concept of interpretation, the complexity of which is far too often trivialized. To the thesis proposed above “no interpretation without articulation,” another must be added immediately after: *no interpretation without conflict*. In fact, interpretation lives in a conflictual space, and this space must not be equated with a multiplicity. This point is absolutely decisive: the idea of a multiplicity that is always open sympathizes with relativism, and relativism is the place of *doxa*; everyone is equally right. Everyone is entitled to their own reading. This is the stance taken by the theories and the aesthetics of reception, which, from the nineteen seventies, criticized, and not without valid reason, the substantially static vision of the text, in which many structuralists had got bogged down: “canonical” structuralism had forgotten the second question of the Russian Formalists (“How does a text work?”), to limit themselves to the first (“What does it consist of?”). Yet a text cannot work without a reader, in the same way as a car cannot travel any distance unless someone starts the engine.

The analyses of many structuralists were *descriptions*, and not interpretations: suffice it to think of the famous reading of Baudelaire’s “Les chats” by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss.

At times, these descriptions were very refined, but they could be compared to the mapping of uninhabited, lifeless districts. Life begins when a district is inhabited. To continue the metaphor, it is at this point that the opportunity arises for different forms of life and different social relationships.

Let us now consider the difference between multiplicity and conflictual plurality. In doxastic multiplicity, everybody is right, even the simplifiers, the incompetent, the factious; on the contrary, in conflictual plurality right and wrong are discussed: the simplest stances leading to sterility are criticized and it is possible to present a more articulated and complex vision of each problem. Is it worth adding that this corresponds to a more mature concept of democracy?

The space of interpretation is conflictual and selective: this is the great difference with reception theories that limit themselves to ratifying every opinion, whether individual or collective, and, consequently, side with multiplicity. Outwardly, multiplicity seems to be the broadest form of tolerance: however, under closer examination, the emphasis of multiplicity reveals its ideological essence, that is to say its egalitarian vocation. And egalitarianism is not justice, but rather its caricature.³ This caricature involves extending the juridical standpoint to every intellectual, existential and political dimension: undoubtedly, all human beings are to be considered equal as far as their fundamental rights are concerned (freedom of thought, of vote, of sexual orientation, and so on). However, equality of rights does not imply that the results are of an equal value: in every field of research true assertions are made and wrong ones. There is no equality between true and false. Nobody doubts that this is the case for “hard” sciences, in other words knowledge that can be submitted to unequivocal verification. It is quite evident that such verification is far more complex and uncertain in the field of humanistic studies and it is this difference that is emphasized by the relativists. However, even where knowledge takes the shape of interpretations, and not assertions, attempts to reach valid results may be differentiated. It has already been pointed out numerous times that if a doctor’s diagnosis is wrong, the patient will see that his condition worsens and he may even die. If a literary critic misinterprets a sonnet, a play, a novel, nothing happens; however, twenty, thirty, forty years later something has happened: the impoverishment, the degradation become phenomena of extraordinary gravity and risk becoming irreversible. The devastation caused by contextualism must be opposed without further ado.

Let us return to the difference between multiplicity and conflictual plurality. Quoting Bakhtin, I said that literary works live in the “great time,” and that they develop thanks to good interpretations. Here is a first, important methodological suggestion: a good interpretation will be recognizable as it renders a text “greater” than it has been up until that moment. This occurs without any forcing, but by developing some *virtualities* of the text.

An interpretation differs from a description insofar as it favours possibilities. In fact, we could say that *an interpretation is always an interpretation of possibility*. But it aims at greater possibilities. This does not mean overlooking the set of data constituting the artefact: quite the contrary! It should be pointed out that when dealing with a rigid artefact, in other words one that is completely articulated (such as the statement, “I’d like a coffee”), the interpreter must restrict himself to performing the role of code-breaker, unless we envisage a context in which the statement may be understood ironically or jokingly, and so on. Therefore, interpretation is a process that can only be triggered by the semantic density of the text: and the density is what is articulated or, in any case, is susceptible to various articulations.

³ This ideological deformation has always accompanied left-wing political movements and culture. Yet, already in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels criticized “social levelling in its crudest form” (“eine rohe Gleichmacherei”; ch. 3).

5. Faust

I think it is appropriate to offer an example that I will take from Goethe's *Faust*. I will refer mainly to this work later on, as I consider it more advantageous to focus on a single text rather than offer a variety of examples that I would only be able to mention in passing. *Faust* presents a set of linear articulations, or large segments, the first part and the second part, which are further subdivided into Acts and into episodes: a series of differences in which the reader finds parallelisms and contrasts. Another level of articulation concerns the characters, each of which forms a unit: what is a character? Should we not already possess a theory of personal identity in order to be able to proceed? *Is identity not expressed in different ways?*⁴ Of course it is: we will shortly highlight the difference between Faust's way of being and that of Mephistopheles. Undoubtedly, this difference represents the heart of *Faust*, and can only be clarified by means of a *conflictual reading*.

Now we are trying to clarify the connection between articulation and interpretation: in the absence of the heuristic "cuts" introduced by articulation, interpretation remains an attempt to fathom the work in its "global meaning," and resembles a butterfly net. Is this not perhaps the way literary scholars proceed, heedless of the complexity of the text? They would like to catch the butterfly-text with an external net, wrap the text in a definitive casing, instead of investigating the labyrinth of connections or the set of relations of which it consists. We must admit that synthesizing formulae cannot be relinquished completely (in a didactic or informative discourse): however, for literary theory they do not indicate the presumed "global meaning" of the text and only perform an ancillary function.

We could say that *Faust* is the tale of a pact: why reject a description that is so neutral in its vagueness? And yet, even this apparently objective expression is open to criticism: what Faust and Mephistopheles agree on is not so much a pact as a challenge or a wager. What does the agreement consist of exactly? The answer seems easy: is it not Faust himself who says that he will acknowledge defeat only if his uneasiness is assuaged? "If ever I lie down in sloth and base inaction, / Then let that moment be my end! . . . I offer you this wager! [*Die Wette biet ich!*]" (Part 1, "Study" 2, 1692-93 and 1698). And again: "If ever to the moment I shall say: / Beautiful moment, do not pass away! [*Verweile doch! du bist so schön!*] / Then you may forge your chains to bind me" (Part 1, "Study" 2, 1699-1702).

The pact is stipulated in two different moments, in two consecutive scenes, both bearing the same title, "Faust's study" ("Studienzimmer"). Does Mephistopheles' reticence not intrigue us? Faust is ready to finalize matters, the devil is less impatient, he seems more worried about being able to leave the place in which he finds himself temporarily imprisoned owing to a cabalistic sign. He will return in the following scene. Why did Goethe decide to postpone the agreement? Perhaps the reason was to create a distance between two moments of such great significance, Faust's meditation on the verse, "In the beginning was the Word," with the possibility of rewriting the Scriptures ("I see how it must read, / And boldly write: 'In the beginning was the Deed!' [*Im Anfang war die Tat!* '])" (Part 1, "Study" 1, 1236-37), and then, in "Study" 2, the description of the pact. For Goethe scholars, however, the two scenes form a whole: in this case, an articulation intended by the author is ignored and dissolved.

The unity between the two scenes is guaranteed by the *Streben*: he who considers himself to be insatiable, will he not of necessity be a man who wishes more than anything else to act? How, if not by performing deeds, could the hero of this work judge their promise of enjoyment? Therefore, "In the beginning was the Deed" is the *arché*, in the

⁴ For an introduction to this perspective, I take the liberty of referring to Bottiroli, "Identity exists only in its modes. The flexible subject and the interpretative mind against semi-cognitive 'sciences'."

double meaning of origin and command that Faust feels called to personify. However, at this point the readers' perplexities begin to show themselves: they are longstanding perplexities, as they date back to Goethe's contemporaries, and first and foremost to Schiller, and they have been reiterated many times since.⁵ Why does Faust hardly ever take action? In truth, he acts more than some readers think, and accepts full responsibility for his actions: when he is ordered to save Margarethe, Mephistopheles replies "I cannot loose the Avenger's bonds or open his bolts!—Save her!—Who was it who ruined her? I, or you?". Faust cannot answer this and does not even attempt to. He "glares about him in speechless rage [*blickt wild umher*]" (Part 1, "A Gloomy Day. Open Country"). In the second part, it is Faust who wishes to descend to the Mothers.

Deed (*die Tat*) is a polysemous term, in other words it is semantically dense. How it is to be understood is probably explained by Goethe himself when he expresses all his admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte, to whom he attributes a state of "continual illumination" ("Erleuchtung"), a state of grace which enabled him to be "one of the most productive men that ever lived." "Productivity," this is the meaning of *deed*. Goethe adds: "one need not write poems and plays to be productive; there is also a productiveness of deeds [*Produktivität der Taten*], which in many cases stands an important degree higher" (Eckermann 246). There is nothing better than this consideration to enable us to understand why Faust does not act in the sense of performing "great deeds," like the ones Marlowe's hero dreams of: "By him, I'll be great Emperour of the world, / And make a bridge, thorough the moving Aire, / To passe the Ocean with a band of men, / I'll joyne the Hills that bind the Affrick shore" (*Doctor Faustus* 1.3). If they are compared with the feats of a cosmic-historic hero that Goethe evokes as follows "His life was the stride of a demi-god, from battle to battle, and from victory to victory" (Eckermann 245-46), the projects of Marlowe's Faust seem to be adolescent, if not even infantile fantasies. Napoleon made it impossible, or if we prefer aesthetically far-fetched, for an author to write about a fantasy hero who devotes himself to action in the historical-political sense of the word.

Faust has to experience other forms of *productivity*. He has to reinterpret the will for dominion as the "will to power" (Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*). This is why the pact is stipulated in two different moments: *Faust's* "Study" 2 is an interpretation of *Faust's* "Study" 1. And, like all good interpretations, "Study" 2 will increase the strength of "Study" 1: the principle of action is reinterpreted as the *principle of non-coincidence*.

This is the first decisive metamorphosis in Goethe's text: it illustrates the difference, or better the antagonism, between two modes of being or modes of identity. The simplest consists in the coincidence with one's self, and is not contradicted by any dynamism or titanism: Marlowe's Doctor Faustus exemplifies this mode of identity, from which Goethe's Faust differs when dynamism is introduced into the logical-ontological dimension. The desire to "be great Emperour of the world, / And make a bridge, thorough the moving Aire," etc., is not sufficient to go beyond the coincidence with oneself.

The conflict between the two modes of identity characterizes all the complex characters in literature—and each of us in real life. Goethe's *Faust* offers one of the noblest illustrations, in fact we could say that it is only in this work that the conflict between coincidence and non-coincidence is fully *thematized*, that is to say it becomes the real theme of a work. It is displayed both in Faust's personality, in his interiority, so to speak, and in his relationship with Mephistopheles. In fact, the challenge concerns the two principles, embodied by the two adversaries. Mephistopheles is the principle of coincidence: so, Faust will reach a point where he calls him "the father of all obstacles" ("Der Vater bist du aller Hindernisse"; 6205; trans. modified), the ultimate obstacle to the desire to go beyond. It is in the light of this conflict that Faust's derisory expression, "Poor

⁵ "In my opinion, Faust should be led into active life" (Schiller to Goethe, 26th June 1797).

devil! What can you offer to me?" ("Was willst du, armer Teufel, geben?"; 1675) must be understood. Faust's *Streben* is the desire to be, and not to have: it is the desire for non-coincidence—what essential gift could he ever receive from the opposing principle?

However, the need to “prop” on it remains.⁶ *Non-coincidence* means ability to metamorphize and, consequently, flexibility. Only because the subject is an “être flexible” (Montesquieu),⁷ can he transform himself, that is change his mode of being, and not simply expand or renew the mode of coincidence. On this occasion we cannot examine the relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles more deeply. There is no doubt, however, that Mephistopheles represents a parodying double for Faust (to return to one of Bakhtin’s concepts [*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 127-28]). Faust’s servant is not only an external servant, an executor waiting patiently to receive the agreed compensation: he is also Faust’s internal shadow, corresponding to what Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* called “spirit of gravity,” which does not so much push downwards as restrains within its own limits.

6. Conflictual Aesthetics and “Conflictual Reading”—Polyphony Is Not Multiphony

Let us recap, trying to highlight the methodological approach adopted here.

(i) To interpret it is necessary to articulate: introduce “cuts” wherever the text is compact, but also, in some cases, strengthen subdivisions that are already present and whose value has not been understood. As far as I know, readers of *Faust* have mainly ignored the splitting of the pact into two scenes: which is totally coherent with a reductive vision of *Streben*, understood as an inexhaustible dynamism, and with a naïve theory of identity. Whoever shares the widespread conviction that identity is given in only one mode, as a coincidence (or the relationship that an entity has only with itself), will not detect any difference between Faust’s “Study” 1 and Faust’s “Study” 2, in other words between the principle of action and the pact with the devil. He will have no reason to imagine that the second scene rewrites the first, offering a more precise and richer interpretation of the desire to act, of that desire that arose in Faust from his disgust at useless knowledge. To reach this hypothesis, it is necessary to have at one’s disposal a theory of identity and of desire: a reader is required who has decided to question himself on the *logical-ontological status of identity* (in real life and in literature). This is why the theory of literature needs to crossbreed with the theories of desire and with philosophy.

(ii) An example, although very brief, of *conflictual reading* has been presented. As already stated, the conflictual status of the work of art is an essential conquest, although a great deal has yet to be done to strengthen the intuitions of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud and Bakhtin. To understand this perspective, it may be worthwhile starting from “nonconflictual” aesthetics, that is to say from traditional aesthetics hinged on the notions of harmony, proportion, etc. and for which conflict may belong to the content of the work, but not to its “form,” that is to its textual and stylistic organization (in the broad sense).

Introduced by the eighteenth century debate over the beautiful and the sublime, conflictual aesthetics may be considered to have come into being in 1872, the year in which *The Birth of Tragedy* was published: the principle inspiring this work is announced in the first paragraph, but once again the risk is that it will not be understood in the absence of a *logical* perspective. Nietzsche affirmed that there are two aesthetic impulses, the

⁶ I refer to the concept of *Anlehnung* in the sense defined by Freud: for example, the more flexible sexual drives prop themselves on the more rigid drives of self-preservation. True flexibility is never “pure”: it uses rigidity to its own advantage.

⁷ “L’homme, cet être flexible” (Montesquieu, Preface to *De l’Esprit des lois*).

Apollonian and the Dionysian, and art can derive almost solely from one of them, in short from the dominance of one or the other, but the supreme art—the Attic tragedy—will derive from their union. This is where the problem lies: because opposite relationships form a multiplicity, in which differences are essential. Simplifying as much as possible, there are three possibilities: the *contradictories*, which are totally incompatible opposites; the *contraries*, compatible opposites, and susceptible to mixed cases; and finally, the *correlatives*, which represent a particular type of opposition as they are interdependent opposites. It should be pointed out that, unlike the contrary (for example black and white, which can blend together in grey), the correlatives are *not synthesizable* (what synthesis could there be between master and slave, between doctor and patient?). This latter case, the most overlooked by the disjunctive logics (from Aristotle to Frege, etc.) is extremely important for understanding artistic languages.

Are Apollonian and Dionysian contraries or correlatives? In the first case, the Attic tragedy would derive from an act of synthesis; whereas in the second, it would express a relationship of antagonism without reconciliation. In the first case, we would still have aesthetics of harmony, in the second we would finally have conflictual aesthetics, *aesthetics of the correlatives*, which are non-synthesizable opposites. Although it is an early work, and in several respects immature, the *Birth of Tragedy* offers a precise answer: there is no synthesis between Apollonian and Dionysian, but an antagonism that is all the more fruitful, the more the conflict does not result in the predominance of one instinct over another. It is almost exclusively in Apollonian art that rigidity dominates (this occurs in Doric art and in the Egyptian style); Nietzsche in 1872 is more lenient towards the unilateralism of the Dionysian, but only after drawing a clear distinction between the barbarian Dionysian and the Hellenic one, because only for the Greeks does the love of form never stop exerting its influence. It will be a more mature Nietzsche who affirms the creative antagonism between opposites in his concept of Great style.⁸

This is the principle of conflictual aesthetics and it had to be pointed out. We come across it later on, in the twentieth century, under other names: for Heidegger it is the conflict between World and Earth, for Lacan it is the interweaving of the three registers, for Bakhtin it is the conflict that manifests itself between modes of identity (characters that coincide with themselves, as those of Racine, and characters that never coincide with themselves, like those of Dostoevsky), but also in the styles and in the relationship between polyphonic and monologic. Let us return once more to *Faust*, and to the readings that diminish it.

(iii) The long story of the reception of *Faust* (like that of many other works) should not be confused with the series of interpretations, that is with the “great time.” Every time a text encounters a new generation, it is inevitably actualized, in other words perceived in a new way: however, an *actualization*, even if it is favourable, does not imply a fruitful understanding and does not necessarily contribute towards a development of the text. On the contrary, the text may be made smaller: are the contextualists not perhaps *downsizers*? Is this not what happens for example when Conrad is read by Said?

In the context of literary studies, the shortsighted love looking into the distance (*distant reading*): they squint, staring at the era to which the work belongs, and they make that blurred synthesis, which the text has become, into the emblem of a historical period. There should be no need to underline the poverty of sociological studies that establish connections between social classes and literary works, as it is right to acknowledge that the sociological approach has started to become more attentive to the dimension of form. So, having referred to Lukács’ judgement which considers *Faust* to be the poem of primary

⁸ On this matter, reference should be made to Heidegger’s extraordinary lectures during the university course, “The Will to Power as Art” (see Heidegger, *Nietzsche*).

accumulation (it tells us of “capital running with blood” [qtd. in Moretti 26]), and having offered an analogy between Faust and Sombart’s speculator, an individual who “sees visions of giant undertakings,”⁹ forgetting that for sociologists, and certainly for Lukács and Sombart, human beings would be able to live only in the mode of coincidence (which does not prevent the nurturing of gigantic dreams!), Franco Moretti feels the need to enter Goethe’s text, at least for a brief reconnaissance: there again his objective is “a materialist history of literary forms” (5). The new contextualism cannot allow itself to ignore literary theory and philosophy completely; some form a unilateral alliance with just one author (with Derrida or with Deleuze, etc.), others prefer to draw occasionally on the field of theory. As a general rule, this is all legitimate, on condition that the concepts and distinctions one wishes to employ are used correctly and after a careful assessment. For example, in his book about Dostoevsky, Bakhtin clearly contrasted polyphony and monologism as different forms of organization of the novel. Polyphony is not simply a multiplicity of voices, a more or less rowdy accumulation according to the pattern of contiguity, of the *nebeneinander*. The real polyphony that we encounter in Dostoevsky is a form of tragic, split thinking: voices challenge each other, fight, suffer the blow of others’ words, crack. Each voice is polyphonic (at least in the most complex characters) as it nourishes an internal torment. Therefore, *polyphony is not multiphony*. The fact that this terminological specification is missing in Bakhtin does not justify the trivializations or the misunderstandings.¹⁰

It is true that Bakhtin seems to forget the complexity of the distinction whenever he compares not different forms of the novel, but the novel in general and the epic: in a contrastive comparison with the classic epic, the whole novel appears to be polyphonic and centrifugal. Nevertheless, whoever intends to understand his theory in a strict manner should privilege the distinction between polyphonic and monologic which is hierarchically superior to the taxonomy of the genres: under closer scrutiny, the presence of centrifugal forces may be observed in the epic, in the same way as we should acknowledge that Racine’s characters are less compact and undivided than Bakhtin judged them to be. As previously stated, the theory of literature is a work in progress where work is carried out continuously in order to enhance the instruments that have shown heuristic potential and that can be further improved. The trains we travel on are no longer pulled by steam locomotives: should we then scorn the invention of the train? Therefore, every criticism leading to progress should be welcomed, while hasty and vulgar criticisms deriving from trivializations and generating only triviality are unacceptable.¹¹

Do we need proof of this? For Franco Moretti “the polyphonic form of the modern West is not the novel, but if anything precisely the epic” (56-57); in its modern version, the epic would include *Faust*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, etc., quite heterogeneous works expanded by an encyclopedic vocation. In this context, we are unable to discuss the usefulness of this proposal, which derives, in any case, from a *taxonomic* approach. Like the other contextualists, Moretti mainly makes use of taxonomic (and not analytical) notions, and

⁹ W. Sombart, *The Quintessence of Capitalism* (1913), trans. by M. Epstein, London 1915, p. 91.

¹⁰ I suggest readers refer to the chapter, “The non-coincidence principle in Michail Bakhtin” in Bottiroli, *Che cos’è la teoria della letteratura. Fondamenti e problemi*. An English translation of this chapter is available on www.giovannibottiroli.it.

¹¹ Apart from the confusion between polyphony and multiphony, Franco Moretti’s essay contains statements that are, to say the least, disconcerting. For example, “impossible to decide whether Mephistopheles is Faust’s ally or his worst adversary” (25), which is the same as saying that *Faust* is completely incomprehensible. Another example: “a constitutive duplicity of the work, which allows Faust to unload ultimate responsibility for his own actions on to his wicked companion . . . Goethe’s brilliant and terrible discovery: the rhetoric of innocence” (25). A gratuitous and untenable thesis, as we have had occasion to mention.

this is an enormous limitation to which we will have to return. But let us examine the question in more detail. For Moretti, *Faust* presents some intensely polyphonic scenes, including “Walpurgis Night.” The fact is that by *polyphony* he means “many voices”: the numerical aspect is decisive. Moretti has not forgotten to count them: “thirty-odd different voices in the first ‘Walpurgis Night’; another thirty in the ‘Dream’; and forty in the ‘Classical Night’” (59); instead, he has completely forgotten to ask himself what is the relationship between the different voices in an authentic polyphony. There is no need for thirty or forty voices, just three or four are sufficient: what really matters is the agonistic relationship that is established between them, that free contact in which the individuals are “provoked” by the truth. The greater the number of voices, the more improbable it will be for a relationship to be established that is not purely contiguous, metonymic or cumulative: a “sorites effect.” Multiphony is *weakened polyphony*, until its dissolution. Therefore, are the multiphonic scenes cited by Moretti so boring—how can we disagree with Borges when he defines part two of *Faust* as “one of the most famous forms of tedium”? Goethe’s greatness does not lie in these scenes. It has been said that no laws exist for literature and probably not even for the other arts: however, there are difficulties that every artist has to reckon with and this justifies some considerations of a general nature. Multiplicity, when it tends to be *nothing else but multiplicity*, has a weakening and boring effect. We find proof of this even in the narratives destined for the public at large, such as the science fiction horror films, in which the presence of a monster may create tension and fear; yet, when the monsters begin to multiply, for example when the hero no longer has to deal with a terrible, gigantic, living mummy, but groups of mummies that he manages to escape from by kicking them, when the vampires are decapitated as easily as swatting flies on a summer’s afternoon, there is an irreversible loss of tension.¹² Not even a film director of the caliber of Tarantino is able to maintain the same level of emotional tension during the episode of *Kill Bill* in which Uma Thurman massacres the *Crazy 88*; with an inspired hunch, Tarantino ends the massacre on a comic note, almost as an apology to the spectators for the inevitable tedium caused by the multiplicity.¹³

7. Freud and the Desire to Be—Identity as a Series of Identifications

“Violence and desire,” Joyce once said, “are the very breath of literature”.¹⁴ It seems that they have been such ever since the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Consequently, we affirmed (par. 4) that literary theory derives from a triple confluence, that is modern linguistics, philosophy and the theory of desire. In the West the debate over desire began with Plato’s *Symposium* that is, in fact, a work in which the discussion is polyphonic—and which does not end with Socrates’ speech or in the exhortation to ascend towards the great sea of Beauty, as is often thought, because added to the speeches of the symposiarchs is

¹² Consider *Alien* (1979), *The Mummy* (1999) and *Blade* (1998), and their respective sequels.

¹³ This is the most evident example of weakening caused by multiplicity: there are some cases that are better disguised, as is the case of Derrida who mortifies the complexity of the individual texts by increasing the intertextual similarities (see par. 10). As far as Mahler is concerned, cited by Moretti as *auctoritas*, his enthusiasm over an inadvertent effect of polyphony (Moretti 58) refers to synchronous interactions, exactly what is missing in the multiphonic and cumulative scenes of *Faust*. The writer who aims at polyphony must introduce synchronous tensions in the narrative flow.

¹⁴ I quote the whole of the passage from which the citation was taken: “Dostoevsky is the man more than any other who has created modern prose, and intensified it to its present-day pitch. It was his explosive power which shattered the Victorian novel with its simpering maidens and ordered commonplaces; books which were without imagination or violence. I know that some people think that he was fantastic, mad even, but the motives he employed in his work, violence and desire, are the very breath of literature” (Power 69).

Alcibiades' incursion, and a final performance in which it is Socrates himself that is praised for his *agalmata*, fascinating and enigmatic objects that he encloses within him and which, for Lacan, illustrate the notion of object (a), the object that is the cause of desire (see *Transference*).

Even if we limit ourselves to the modern-day debate launched by Freud, it would still be an arduous task to attempt to account for the main conceptions of desire and, in any case, a much greater space would be required than that available in a journal; however, I am presenting a *manifesto* and, therefore, a piece of writing in which the right to concise declarations is normally granted. What counts is to take a stand on the fundamental concepts, and suggest some lines of research. Furthermore, the *pars destruens* of my discourse must be developed, in order to highlight the limits and inadequacies of the "cultural" approaches.

As a consequence, I will not hesitate to take a stand. As far as the debate on desire is concerned, I believe the direction of research that is conceptually richer and which offers more precise instruments of analysis is that of Freud and Lacan. This does not imply any dogmatic endorsement, on the contrary: I cannot help but reaffirm my conviction of the need to *rewrite* the main theses of psychoanalysis starting from literature.¹⁵ And by no way do I exclude comparison with other theories, such as those of Bataille, Girard, Deleuze (without forgetting classic works such as the one by de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*). In any case, it would be impossible to underline the strong points of psychoanalysis without rejecting the most stereotyped prejudices and without recognizing at the same time what appears to have been surpassed.

The attempts to diminish the thoughts of Freud and Lacan by restricting them to Oedipus and to phallogocentrism derive from incompetence and bad faith: on the other hand, it is necessary to acknowledge the serious responsibilities of Freudian and Lacanian orthodoxy. It must be admitted that for a certain period, in the years following the publication of *Écrits*, the comprehension of Lacan's research was quite limited; hindered by the hermetic and baroque style of the work which had made it famous, it was fragmented into just a few concepts:¹⁶ the phase of the mirror (a notion that everyone was able to understand without, however, reaching an understanding of the Imaginary), and the theory of the unconscious structured as a language, filtered by the alliance with Jakobson, and by the pairing of the Freudian processes of displacement and condensation and the rhetorical devices of metaphor and metonymy. This alliance produced some positive effects although it has now become dated and inadmissible.

What is desire for Freud? According to the anti-psychoanalytic stereotypes, it is almost always understood as the desire to have, directed at a forbidden (incestuous) object. Although the first object of love is the mother also for a girl, the male Oedipus is still considered to be an archetypal scheme. The triangulation "desire—Law—forbidden object" is considered to be the fundamental core of psychoanalysis, including that of Lacan. In fact, whoever fails to recognize that "the 3 of Oedipus" become the three registers in Lacan (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) is destined to understand little or nothing about psychoanalysis. However, let us remain with Freud. The Freudian concept of desire is best described in an essay of 1921, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, based on the distinction between the desire to be and the desire to have, that is between identification

¹⁵ I take the liberty of referring to Bottiroli, *Perché bisogna riscrivere Lacan. A partire dalla letteratura (cioè dalla flessibilità)*.

¹⁶ Today we not only have most of the Seminars at our disposal—the first 8 are certainly more accessible than the *Écrits*—, but also texts that present Lacan's thoughts with great clarity: in particular, the following should be commended: *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* and *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* by Bruce Fink, and the monograph by Massimo Recalcati, *Jacques Lacan* (in two volumes).

and investment in an object. This essay presents, in a sufficiently articulate way, an extraordinary development compared with philosophical tradition (a development that has still not been grasped today by the so-called “analytical philosophy,” or even by human sciences) as far as the concept of “identity” is concerned. Identity is always a relationship: however, for philosophical tradition it consists in the relationship that an entity has only with itself. The great omission, the great mistake lies in believing that identity presents itself only in the mode of coincidence. On the contrary, as we have already mentioned, *there is no identity without a mode of identity*. And there are two main modes: coincidence and non-coincidence with oneself. Further articulations are necessary, but we must never forgo this distinction.

It represents a decisive turn and its pioneering audacity is such, even on a philosophical plane, that even Freud himself did not emphasize it enough. However, from a conceptual viewpoint, Freudian discourse is sufficiently well-developed: *identity consists of a series of identifications*, and identification is the relationship by which one subject is determined by another subject. *Identity becomes such only thanks to the relationship with another identity*.

It seems appropriate to clarify this definition immediately:

(a) to be able to experience a process of identification, the subject must be flexible, that is to say plastic. The flexibility of human beings depends on the fact that drives are plastic forces (*plastische Kräfte*) (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*).

(b) Identification is a process of transformation which is, to a great extent, unconscious, even if this does not exclude the possibility that the subject is aware of the models that he admires and which he allows himself to be transformed by. Don Quixote wishes to be Amadigi di Gaula, Emma Bovary wishes to be the romantic heroines of the novels that she read at boarding school. A distinction must be made between identification in the eminent sense as we are describing it here, and the ephemeral identifications which only influence an individual temporarily and do not leave any relevant marks: it would be better to call this type of identification *empathization*. The intense emotional empathy that a spectator feels towards the protagonist of a film for a couple of hours should not be called *identification*, unless a precise distinction is maintained between the two processes.

(c) Therefore, identification is a far more complicated process than empathy, to which the cognitive sciences currently restrict themselves, and which has received attention for example in the important essays by Martha Nussbaum.

(d) How many identifications could there be that significantly modify the identity of a subject over a lifetime? In the terms of Goethe and Nietzsche: *how many metamorphoses is a man capable of?* Freud’s answer is that there can be many and that the identification with a model/rival in the Oedipus triangle is only the first of them.

(e) The irresistible attraction exerted by a model (Napoleon for Julien Sorel, for example) represents the most intuitive and easily comprehensible form of the process of identification. However, for Freud we can even identify ourselves with the object of desire, and this “confusion” characterizes both falling in love and love. More rarely, and in a more ephemeral way, a person may wish to be a material object. An example, “O that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek” (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.23-24). In Lacan’s view, identification may also refer to *das Ding*, the Thing. For example, Sade’s characters wish to be absorbed by Nature, pander to the stronger movement (the crime), and vanish in its never-ending impulse for destruction and renewal.

We should not lose track of this range of possibilities: identifying oneself with a model, or an object or with the Thing.

(f) Finally, we must distinguish between *modes of identification*: a subject (*idem*) may be modelled by another subject (*alter*) to the point that they undergo a true and proper alienation: is this not what happens to Don Quixote? He maintains his previous identity only from a numerical point of view, and from the time-space context in which he lives:

but his personality has dissolved, has disappeared in a vortex called Amadigi di Gaula; any distance from the model has been abolished—in his desire to be, obviously. I will call this mode of identification *confusive*. It should be noted that confusivity is not simply and trivially confusion (that we experience in our daily lives): by the term *alienation* the intensity of the process is indicated, without loading it though with pathological connotations.

In fact, what would Madame Bovary have been without the books that extolled romantic passion, in other words a passion not bound by previous, socially ratified choices? She would have remained the faithful wife of Charles (what a sad destiny!). The confusive opens the doors for her to a different existence. Let us re-read the famous passage in which Emma discovers that she has become herself:

Mais, en s'apercevant dans la glace, elle s'étonna de son visage. Jamais elle n'avait eu les yeux si grands, si noirs, ni d'une telle profondeur. Quelque chose de subtil épandu sur sa personne la transfigurait.

Elle se répétait: "J'ai un amant! un amant!" se délectant à cette idée comme à celle d'une autre puberté qui lui serait survenue. Elle allait donc posséder enfin ces joies de l'amour, cette fièvre du bonheur dont elle avait désespéré. Elle entrait dans quelque chose de merveilleux où tout serait passion, extase, délire; une immensité bleuâtre l'entourait, les sommets du sentiment étincelaient sous sa pensée, et l'existence ordinaire n'apparaissait qu'au loin, tout en bas, dans l'ombre, entre les intervalles de ces hauteurs.

Alors elle se rappela les héroïnes des livres qu'elle avait lus, et la légion lyrique de ces femmes adultères se mit à chanter dans sa mémoire avec des voix de soeurs qui la charmaient. (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 167)¹⁷

This passage would deserve a long comment, also of a philosophical nature. There is, without doubt, something paradoxical in affirming that someone becomes himself by "becoming someone else," and yet nobody can escape this necessity: our condition as flexible beings implies the absence of an original nucleus to refer to. Consequently, loyalty to our desire (for Lacan the only precept of the ethics of psychoanalysis [see *The ethics of psychoanalysis*]) cannot be realized unless we go beyond the models in which we have inevitably sought a form—we are too plastic as beings to enter a world already having a form. We can search for our authenticity only by moving forward, so to speak, in other words by interpreting our possibilities. And every interpretation is risky, unplanned and never entirely governable.

It has been said that even the confusive can increase an individual's possibilities, as it is liable to push him beyond the limits in which his existence tended to close itself. And yet extreme forms of "becoming another" are inclined to stiffen the subject: he ends up by running aground in the otherness—how can it be denied? So, the process of non-coincidence with oneself may be interrupted, and result in its opposite. To avoid the effects of stiffening, to keep our identity flexible, a certain distance must be kept from the model: it must remain a source of inspiration and not act as a mimetic restriction. I call this mode

¹⁷ "But when she saw herself in the glass she wondered at her face. Never had her eyes been so large, so black, of so profound a depth. Something subtle about her being transfigured her. / She repeated, "I have a lover! a lover!" delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium. An azure infinity encompassed her, the heights of sentiment sparkled under her thought, and ordinary existence appeared only afar off, down below in the shade, through the interspaces of these heights. / Then she recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voices of sisters that charmed her" (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Eleanor Marx and Paul de Man 131).

of identification *distinctive*. It is exemplified by characters such as Julien Sorel and Raskol'nikov; in Dostoevsky's hero, the desire to be is torturous, cruel, as he cannot refute the distance separating him from superior men, and at the same time he does not know other forms of attraction.

8. Beyond the Lack and the Production—The Desire to Be Is a Lawless Desire

For Freud, the desire to be is not less important than the desire to have: rather, it is more important for the formation of identity. Why has its importance not been understood, even within the field of psychoanalysis? What is the reason for such diffidence? Freud said that if one begins to yield to words, one ends by yielding to things too (see *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*). Therefore, I wish to stress this expression, after defining it. Let us leave aside straightaway the banality of being as opposed to having, in the sense of the superiority of the spiritual dimension compared with the material one. It is obviously not this that we are speaking about. Instead, we may imagine that what aroused the psychoanalysts' diffidence was Freud's attitude as he believed that philosophy was constantly aimed at a wish for saturation, under the illusion that it is possible to provide a coherent and complete image of the world without any gaps. As far as the verb *to be* is concerned, diffidence was also shown by the philosophers, for example by Nietzsche (see *Twilight of the Idols*). However, with Heidegger the meaning of ontology changed radically, and it is to Heidegger's perspective, reinterpreted as *modal ontology*, that I will refer.¹⁸

From a philosophical viewpoint, the difficulties could be defined as follows:

- the standardized conflict between being and becoming, where being is always implicitly thought of as "static";
- the oblivion of the ontological difference, that is the irresistible tendency to reduce being to the entity (on this point see Heidegger);¹⁹
- the vision of being as fullness: Sartre too fell into this trap, his desire to be aims at the synthesis between *in-itself* and *for-itself*. Perhaps it was the very formulation of Sartre that had a certain inhibiting effect on Lacan.

By contrast, for the conception advanced here, the desire to be is intended dynamically as *desire not to coincide with oneself: desire to go beyond* (and not of completion!). This conception is certainly inspired by Nietzsche and Freud: by the will to power, which is not will of power (a misunderstanding which has now been definitively clarified) and by the theory of identity as a series of identifications. The wish for non-coincidence has found literature to be the most eminent place for its development and the character of Faust represents one of its most explicit examples.

It should be pointed out that the desire for a "beyond" is not necessarily directed towards a model that is admired unconditionally, or towards a model/rival which arouses an ambivalent passion (it is the difference that René Girard refers to between external and internal mediator): it derives from the power itself of the subject, from its vital overabundance. This is true for Faust, and also for Ulysses, whose return journey begins from the island of Ogygia, where he is prisoner of a beautiful nymph who wishes to give him the gift of immortality: *Ogygia is the possibility of coincidence*, staying eternally with

¹⁸ For an introduction to Heidegger's ontology, I take the liberty of referring to Bottioli, *The possibility of not coinciding with oneself: a reading of Heidegger as a modal thinker*.

¹⁹ Yet it is simplistic to consider Heidegger as the thinker of the ontological difference. Being for Heidegger is *polemos*.

oneself. This is what Ulysses refutes—and it is the possibility of non-coincidence that Dante understood and exalted by attributing a new journey to him.

I think that Girard's conception deserves more than just a mention. The theory of the mimetic desire is, in fact, hinged on the desire to be, and more precisely on the thesis that there is always another person who presides over the start of the desire: there is always a mediator, and it is the mediator's being rather than the object that absorbs the will of the subject. Desire is not autonomous. Girard attempted to show it in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), by referring to Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Proust, and later in the essay on Shakespeare (*A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*). His analyses are stimulating, but too schematic and spoilt by many points that are forced. As we cannot discuss them here, we will try to perceive the methodological error and will start by asking ourselves why Girard replaced the term *identification* with *mimesis*, and what was the price he paid for such concealment.

On being accused of having hidden his enormous debt to Freud, Girard could have replied that in Freud the desire to be is constantly crushed against the Oedipal scene: Oedipus is the original, archetypal triangle compared with which each subsequent triangularity would appear as a copy. This criticism is in part justified. However, psychoanalysis with Freud and after Freud—Girard's silence regarding Lacan is completely unacceptable—, was able to offer a richer and more articulate conception. Girard's mimetic desire belongs entirely to the dimension that Lacan called the *Imaginary*: but the Imaginary is only one of the three registers, and Girard's greatest limitation is to have ignored the differences with the Symbolic and the Real. This led to his constant forcing of the texts.²⁰

Now we can formulate a more complete definition of the desire to be. For Western tradition, starting from Plato's *Symposium*, desire always relates to a lack of something. There again, this is what common sense tells us: we desire what we do not have. Less naïvely, the lack may be understood as a lack of being (*manque d'être*, Sartre) or want-to-be (*manque à être*, Lacan). Contrary to this concept, some (including Deleuze) affirmed that desire is production. The controversial objective is, in particular, psychoanalysis, which would remain subordinate to the curse of desire, understood as a lack, an infinite and frustrating chase after a lost object, of a completeness in respect of which the Law, the signifier, acts as an insurmountable obstacle (see Deleuze). That desire is structurally "castrated" by the Law is what a vitalistic philosopher such as Deleuze cannot allow.

We can answer Deleuze's criticisms by saying that he confuses lack and privation and that in a non-caricatural vision, desire is a generative force and not simply chasing after an object that is lacking; and that it is possible to think of a non-punitive or sacrificial version of the law.²¹ Yet this is not enough: desire must, above all, be thought of as the desire to be. Thus, desire is not targeted at the lack, rather it is nurtured by the power: it is not castrated (in other words partially emptied) by the Law, because it does not challenge the Law but rather the models, that is to say complex singularities that it admires, but wishes to surpass. "I shall tear the laurel wreath from his brow", these words of a writer (Kleist), who was less profuse but as great as Goethe, express an ambition which has nothing to do with Girard's mimetic desire: they express a desire for creativity that results in production, or better still in productivity. "Becoming an artist" is certainly one of the highest forms of the will to conquer oneself. And as it manifests itself in challenging other singularities, and not in the infringement of rules (if not as an inevitable effect), we must say that the desire to be is a *lawless desire*.

²⁰ See Bottiroli, *Shakespeare e il teatro dell'intelligenza. Dagli errori di Bruto a quelli di René Girard*.

²¹ See Recalcati, *Jacques Lacan and Contro il sacrificio*.

9. Lacan and the Theory of the Registers

This does not mean, however, that the desire to be as a desire to go beyond aspires to fullness, to the undivided, to the One. The overturning of *désir* in favour of *jouissance* has been theorized in recent years by Jacques-Alain Miller, who has interpreted from this perspective Lacan's last seminars in which a change of emphasis was noted from Symbolic to Real. I will try to outline the terms of the problem.

From the beginning, Lacan drew on what we can consider to be the guiding idea of structuralism, in other words *the primacy of relationships over terms*, although he added the non-organized to the organized dimension: he not only considered relationships, but also non-relationships, that is the possibility of an absence or a collapse of the relationship. This gave rise to the theory of the three registers. For Freud, the psyche was divided into areas (Id, Ego and Superego) and in processes (free energy, bound energy): it was also divided linguistically, as the unconscious is a language, but a language that differs from the language governed by social rules. Freud thought of the unconscious as if it were structured like a language, but he did not define it as such. Lacan's innovation consists above all of a reformulation of the areas and the rules: the three registers reunite these different aspects.

Therefore, each individual is a dynamic, chaotic, shapeless mass (the Real), which can have access to a form by entering more organized spaces, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In both spaces, chaos is suspended, but a confusive logic reigns in the Imaginary: the forms give identity and they take it away. The myth of Narcissus epitomizes these destructive swings: the Ego desires the ideal Ego, the image which is its narcissistic perfection and desires in vain to be reunited with it. Right from the beginning, a split has penetrated the relations with oneself. In other versions of narcissism, the passion for oneself will become ambivalent: Dorian Gray wishes to coincide with the image in the portrait and he hates it because such a coincidence is impossible.

It is impossible to live only in the Real and in the Imaginary: here the atmosphere is unbearably; and yet it is the atmosphere that we are and that blends with our breath. Soothing the atmosphere, extinguishing the vehemence, placating it is the task of the Symbolic, the register of language and of the Law. The Symbolic is the possibility to live with others, to put an end to the endless rivalry with the doubles, to resolve the crisis of the *Degree*, to take up one of Shakespeare's expressions.²² Now, individuals have a name and not only a shape. Lacan greatly emphasized the pacifying function of language, although he also underlined its alienating effects. In any case, the units which for semiotics are signs, for Lacan become signifiers. A signifier for Lacan is not half of Saussure's sign, but rather a sign (a "unit") that does not have its own centre of gravity within it: it slides towards other signifiers, may be endlessly. Here again is the primacy of the relations. But, it is necessary to move on from relations to the styles of thinking, and to their conflict.

I have tried to present the fundamental core of Lacan's thought so that its fruitfulness is understood for the analysis of literary texts: is it worth stressing that I have not made any reference to Oedipus or to the Phallus? Must we continue to listen to the stereotypes with which feminism has tried to demonize theories with greater heuristic power? Should we rely on Rosi Braidotti's nomadism or Judith Butler's constructivism?

At the same time, no orthodoxy is proposed here, but directions for development. As I have already mentioned, some of Lacan's concepts must be rethought and reformulated: first and foremost, the Symbolic, that cannot be reduced to the Law, but must be understood as the dimension of intellectual complexity. The bar that Lacan placed on the "O" of the Big Other should be interpreted as an index of the conflict characterizing this register.²³

²² The reference is to Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (2.3.101), developed by Girard.

²³ And not simply as an index of incompleteness.

“*Polemos* and *logos* are the same [*dasselbe*],” Heidegger said (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 65). Lacan’s Symbolic should be interpreted following Heidegger as a dimension of *antagonisms between styles of thought*.

At certain times, this was the perception that Lacan himself had, although he was unable to develop it and, in the end, he wandered off the fruitful path of the *polemos*. And yet, in the seminar on “The Purloined Letter,” which opens the *Écrits*, Lacan presented a refined analysis of Poe’s short story, which we can place amongst “the tales of intelligence” or of the Symbolic, next to the tales of terror in which the Real dominates.²⁴ He distinguished three positions of the subject, insofar as he can embody three different types of glance and he described the possibility of sliding or not sliding from one position to another. In my interpretation of Lacan’s *Seminar*, the types of glance become more explicitly styles of thought, logical styles: which means that *logic does not exist*.

First of all, the text must be articulated, introducing “cuts” and “splits.” From the syntagmatic point of view, three scenes will be differentiated: this distinction is rather intuitive and does not require any particular technique. The great innovation concerns the articulation of what the structuralists used to call the paradigmatic axis, the primacy of which for Barthes (“L’activité structuraliste”) represented the strong point of structuralism: not the “grammatical” one, which aims to reconstruct one or more *langues*. I wish to propose here my interpretation of Lacan’s interpretation, in a diagram that is immediately comprehensible:

	First scene	Second scene	Third scene
<i>the blindman’s glance</i>	the King	the police	the Minister
<i>the narcissist’s glance</i>	the Queen	the Minister	Dupin
<i>the strategist’s glance</i>	the Minister	Dupin	the letter

Fig. 2 – Styles of thought in “The Purloined Letter”

The “vertical” articulation by means of three glances, each of which is governed by a logical style, certainly goes beyond structuralism, as implemented in the past: the structuralists were unable to understand, except only rarely (just in Barthes and in Lacan), that the analysis of the text should not favour the relationship between *parole* and *langue*, hence the reconstruction of a system underlying numerous texts (this is the path that I have called *grammatical*). They did not understand that language is *divided language*, inhabited by conflicting styles.²⁵

The ingeniousness of Poe’s tale does not lie in a rather elementary trick, that is of placing in full view and showcasing what one presumes should be hidden: if this were the case, it would really be “a fairytale for children,” even if a refined one.²⁶ The tale illustrates the difference between styles of thought and, above all the blindness of the *separative* way of thinking, that of the police who proceed by breaking down the space of the investigation

²⁴ Compared with the lessons of *Seminar II* (1954-1955), in which he analyzes the tale of Poe, the text of 1966 is more suggestive, but sacrifices some very important observations.

²⁵ Even the debate following Derrida’s attack was extremely poor (see Muller and Richardson). Nobody understood that the register of the Symbolic should be split into regimes of sense or styles of thought.

²⁶ This is how it was defined by Jacques-Alain Miller, a scholar who has great merits as far as the comments on the Lacanian texts are concerned, but who has never known how to question Lacan’s limitations: on the contrary, he accentuated them (see Miller, *Pezzi staccati. Introduzione al Seminario XXIII “Il sinthomo”* 98. The texts derive from a course by Miller—“Pièces détachées”—held in Paris in 2004-2005 and published in *La cause freudienne*, nos. 60-61).

into what Bergson would have called *partes extra partes*, in other words, into adjoining portions, to be examined very thoroughly. The letter remains invisible for two reasons: it is not simply an object, but rather a signifier that produces mental effects; and because the police show that they are incapable, to quote the words of Dupin, of identifying with the mind of minister D., and this is caused “by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged” (Poe 261). It should be noted that here we are talking about a *cognitive* identification, of a recognition in the mind of others in order to prepare suitable countermoves, and not of a mimetic adhesion (we are in the Symbolic and not in the Imaginary).

Let us return a moment to Lacan’s analysis concerning the meaning of *hiding* as a mental and not a material operation. As it is not a thing, but a signifier, the letter does not belong to the order of *reality* but to that of *truth*, and it is for this reason that it can be hidden in an *alethic* sense:

You do see, that only in the dimension of truth can something be hidden. In the real, the very idea of a hidden place is insane—however deep into the bowels of the earth someone may go bearing something, it isn’t hidden there, since if he went there, so can you. Only what belongs to the order of truth can be hidden. It is truth which is hidden, not the letter. For the policemen, the truth doesn’t matter, for them there is only reality, and that is why they do not find anything. (Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* 201-202)

On an epistemological level, the police are, therefore, guilty of a double modal fallacy, insofar as they reduce the modal dimensions of the truth to just one dimension, actuality, and they believe in the oneness of reason, in its monotony, and ignore the fact that reason is divided into the styles of thought that form its unstable and multifaceted identity. Nothing could be hidden for a *separative* rationality—Lacan was perfectly right, nothing can be concealed or covered in reality, which is divisible and penetrable. In actuality there are no invisible or insurmountable barriers. If the police do not find the letter, it is because *minister D. has hidden it in the scission between the styles of thought*, and the police are unable to find it there.

At this point we can suggest a connection between Tolstoy’s definition of the work of art as a labyrinth of linkages and the conception of divided language. The result is a new image of the text, as a fabric of styles gushing from the virtualities of the language and of the mind:

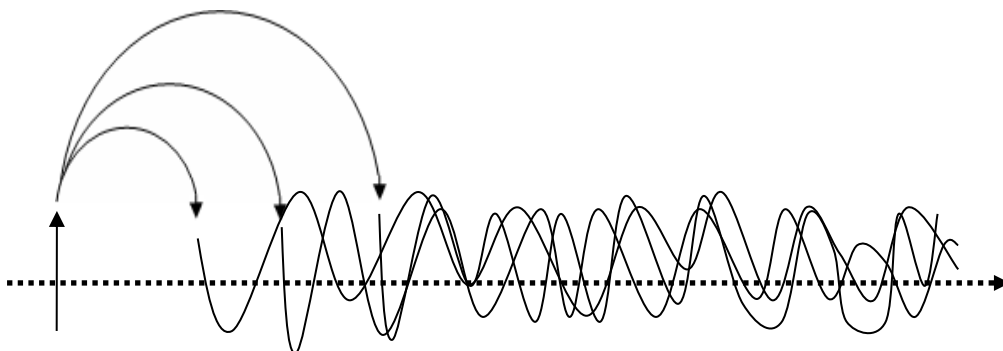


Fig. 3 – The rain of styles.

I have called this diagram *the rain of styles* (Bottiroli, *La ragione flessibile* 261). It outlines a vision of language as a field of virtualities: here it shows the styles that split the Lacanian Symbolic (we have already encountered them: they are the separative, the confusive and

the distinctive), but it can show other rival possibilities (the choices of figures of speech, for example).

Now it is easier to understand the meaning of a conflict that is also an interweaving. It is mainly from the interweaving that the effect traditional aesthetics called “harmony” depends, which has, however, often been understood as *concordia discors*, and so with the perception of dissonance.²⁷

With the developments described here, we go beyond Lacan, and, above all, beyond the Lacanian orthodoxy, of which I would like to point out the main dogma:

- language is considered in its action as mainly negative, or better still deprivative. Miller affirms that “The Law of the Name-of-the-Father is basically nothing more than the law of language,” to add immediately after that the Law “says no, . . . says no because the field of language is made of this no” (“L’être et l’Un”). This is a great mistake on the part of Lacan’s followers: language does not say “no”; language says “not,” and the “not” is the activity of articulation, the set of negative-differential relations (that structuralism has inherited from Saussure) and the conflict amongst the styles.

- The metaphor is not a replacement, except in the simplest and most codified cases: it is a horizontal interaction (as demonstrated by Max Black), and not a vertical alternation. The substitutive conception of the metaphor, which Lacan took up from Jakobson, is a true and proper epistemological obstacle as far as the theory of identification is concerned. Is the action exerted by the *alter* on *idem* not comparable perhaps with a metaphorization? The answer is, undoubtedly, yes, but other possibilities must also be considered.

10. Derrida and the New Contextualism: Unlimited Intertextuality

Before returning to the contextualism of *cultural studies*, another theoretical position must be examined, that of Jacques Derrida, with whom my position shares some resemblances. Consequently, there is the risk that some misunderstandings may arise. On the surface, Derrida’s conception is anti-contextualist: in fact, his most well-known thesis, *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, expresses the refusal of any type of literary criticism which intends to bind a text to its historical or referential context, to the *intentio auctoris*, and so on. How should this slogan, which is so often misunderstood by its critics, actually be understood? Does it affirm that only language exists? Certainly not. Does it intend to declare the superiority of words compared with the things that we encounter in our everyday lives, or which are studied by science? In part yes, at least in the sense of underlining the role of language in constructing experience. However, to understand the *methodological* character of this thesis better, which not by chance was announced in a paragraph entitled “L’exorbitant. Question de méthode,” it is worthwhile rereading a passage, all in italics, which probably represents the main key to its interpretation. I will quote it in its entirety: “*The security with which the commentary considers the self-identity of the text, the confidence with which it carves out its contour, goes hand in hand with the tranquil assurance that leaps over the text toward its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified*” (*Of Grammatology* 159).

²⁷ The conflictual interweaving is an essential condition to be able to tackle the problems of hybridization. From my perspective, it is necessary to distinguish *hybridization amongst genres* (amongst literary genres, but also between sexes, races, etc.) and *hybridization amongst styles*. The latter can be found in texts that are not heterogeneous from a lexical viewpoint; therefore, in Petrarch, in Racine—and obviously in the tale by Poe that has been analyzed. The result is a profound revision of the distinction used by Auerbach, between *Stiltrennung* and *Stilmischung*: even the authors of *Stiltrennung* know (or may know) the heterogeneous nature of the styles of thought. On the contrary, a hybridization that concentrates above all on differences of genre will offer very modest results from an aesthetic viewpoint.

Hence, Derrida is criticizing some widely spread ideas, according to which:

- a text has an *inside* and an *outside*. The distinction is created by the contours, which are empirically visible and naïvely dogmatized; this also leads to the distinction between form (as a shell) and content.

- Each text has its own autonomy, thanks to the rigidity of the boundaries separating it from other texts; it constitutes a *complete entity*; in the case of works of art, such completeness should be valued as *intransitivity*.

- The meaning is contained in the text like water in a reservoir: static, immobile, but not always transparent. In fact, a type of criticism exists which aims at the hidden meaning, at the depths that are not immediately visible (and psychoanalytical criticism is the most obvious version). However, the certainty of being able to “leap over the text towards its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified” characterizes all the tradition of *logocentrism*, the ontology of the presence that Heidegger did not investigate in depth.

Regarding these widespread convictions, Derrida objects that:

- there are no rigid boundaries between inside and outside: each sign (each semiotic unit) exists in the relations with other signs, and there is no reason to limit the game of negative-differential relations to within the text. Structuralists, a little more effort! (paraphrasing the title of Sade’s pamphlet), and you will be able to admire the beginning of the *débordement*, the flooding that destroys all the boundaries and enables the “text” (in inverted commas) to be thought of as immersed in a vaster field, a net, “a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida, “Living On” 84).

- The autonomy of a text is illusory: every text is an *intertext*, it is the transformation of other texts. Therefore, a text is always incomplete, as it is taken in relations of deferment.

- A text consists of *traces*. This term does not refer to a fabric, but rather to a weaving, a becoming that denies the notion of origin and can admit it only as a retroactive effect. “*The (pure) trace is difference*,” which is not “a difference between” (two or more given entities): “It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 62).

Derrida’s objectives are clear: to free the text from all rigidity, and so from every boundary, according to the traditional conception which structuralism would also have shared; have done with the “form/content” distinction; reject all hermeneutics of the meaning; throw the text into a permanent dynamism, freeing it from the restrictions of the context. These objectives may appear similar to those inspiring my manifesto: in actual fact, they are quite different. The more they seem similar, the more they must be understood in a different way.

It is not my intention to reintroduce criticisms that were addressed to the presumed “excesses” of deconstructionism: instead, I would like to pinpoint the limitations, the defects, the errors, first and foremost on a philosophical (and political) level. There is something irremediably dated in the philosophies of the difference (Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault) which had such great influence starting from the 1960s, and that is the conviction that logocentrism is a thought directed towards the One, the Presence and, consequently, a static condition. If this were the case, every thought of multiplicity, of difference, of becoming would have a subversive force, and would contribute towards the struggle against power devices. This is not so. The capitalist society is structurally a dynamic society, it is a society in which, to recall Marx’s words, “All that is solid melts into air” (*Communist Manifesto*, ch. 1 par. 18). Even the traditional metaphysics of the One melted some time ago: as early as the nineteenth century, all the main philosophies emphasized the becoming as evolution or like an unpredictable, explosive energy. Capitalism has increasingly become the *society of the multiplicity*, to the point that it

presents itself as a “liquid society,” according to Bauman’s expression. It could, without doubt, be objected that this is a bad multiplicity: that the production of possibilities and differences, fed by capitalism, is reduced to the offer of optionals, that is choices ready-made by the market. All of this is true: but is it feasible that a bad multiplicity may be redeemed by a good one, in the sense of an exaltation of becoming? On this occasion, we cannot examine in depth the political discourse, so let us return to literature.

Let us consider another apparent similarity. For Derrida two types of texts exist, those that coincide with themselves (the rigidly articulated texts, in daily life—“I’d like a coffee”—or in formalized languages) and the texts that do not coincide with themselves: the latter are the ones that show the truth underlying every text, and its inclination towards deferment, towards the game of differences. The *débordant* text consists of the relationships with the textual otherness: therefore, it is always incomplete. Its identity is *différance*, and the differential relations are infinite. Strictly speaking, a non-relationship does not exist for Derrida, and if a message can go missing—if it is possible for a letter not to arrive at its destination—, this is explained by the proliferation of relationships and not by the existence of limits.

We find ourselves, with some surprise, facing a new form of contextualism, whereby the text dissolves into intertextuality. Whoever believes deconstructionism is similar to *close reading* is wrong: Derrida’s gaze is based on an element or a portion of the text, but quickly slides towards other texts.²⁸ Unlike the contextualism of *cultural studies*, it is independent of the historical situation in which the text was written, but only to be included in a boundless context, within a horizon that continually dilates.

In this way, the vision offered by conflictual aesthetics is renounced: irenic and pre-Nietzschean aesthetics are resumed. The analysis of the “necessary rings of a well-wrought style” (Proust) is waived. The text is no longer a labyrinth of linkages, consisting of conflicting forces, but it is a field of associations. This is the practice of deconstruction: the exaltation of the deferments and of the differences leads, in fact, to an *inflation of similarities*.

I shall confine myself to one example, concerning a brief text so it is easily verifiable: in “Le facteur de la vérité,” a true anti-Lacanian *sottisier* in which an attack, that is venomous to say the least, is unleashed against psychoanalysis, Derrida offers his interpretation of “The Purloined Letter.” Or better, he proposes an intertextual analysis of the three tales forming the Dupin trilogy, emphasizing overlapping points and similarities. In this way, the tales of intelligence, as we have called them, where antagonism is displayed (or if we prefer the “difference” between heterogenous styles of thought), become a space where the doubles chase and challenge each other: a homogenous space that is finally returned to Oedipus and to the Phallus. The conflict amongst registers and also amongst the regimes within the Symbolic that characterizes “The Purloined Letter,” but far less the other two tales, is totally erased.

I stated that “Le facteur de la vérité” is a container of nonsense: this judgement may sound a little too harsh. And yet here we are facing a radical conflict between interpretations: we cannot say that both Lacan and Derrida are right at the same time. In this methodological duel, we must realize that the main criticisms formulated by Derrida are false, that is they lack any support on a philological level both with regard to Poe and to Lacan. Let us consider at least the decisive thesis: according to Derrida, the character of Dupin “like *all* the characters, inside and outside the narration, successively occupies *all* the places” (“Le facteur de la vérité” 491). He adds immediately after: “We have seen that *all* the characters of *The Purloined Letter*, and those of the «real drama» in particular,

²⁸ And when it remains within a single text, the reason is to perform erratic or nomadic movements, a sort of “coming and going,” which never attempts—and is not able—to understand the strategic dimension of the work, its permanent flexibility.

Dupin included, successively and structurally occupied *all* the positions Each position identifies itself with the other This compromises the distinction of the three glances proposed by the Seminar” (492). It is sufficient to return for a moment to the schema outlined in par. 9 to realize that these statements are groundless: there are characters who are glued to their place, that is to say to only one of the registers (and more precisely to one of the regimes of the Symbolic), like the King and the police (closed in the separative), but also the Queen (who belongs to the confusive, to the logic of the Imaginary);²⁹ these are *simple* characters. Simple and rigid, with only one way of looking and thinking. On the contrary, minister D. and Dupin are complex characters, as they are *flexible*, capable of sliding from one register to another: the articulation of the registers that they know how to interpret, or by which they are captured, determines the breadth of their destiny. Finally, Dupin never occupies the place of the blindman, unlike the Narrator, whose intellectual inferiority does not need to be underlined, and who for Derrida instead would be a double of Dupin.³⁰

The fact that this essay by Derrida met with notable success proves how uncertain and fallible the research and construction of models for analysis actually are. It is worth remembering that this essay aroused the enthusiasm of feminist critics especially for the attack on *phallogocentrism*, in other words the primacy of the Phallus as the presumed guiding principle of the Lacanian Seminar. In fact, according to Derrida—and here his blindness and his intentionally misleading objective reach their peak—, for Lacan (in the same way as for Marie Bonaparte!) “the castration of the woman (of the mother) is the final sense, what *The Purloined Letter* means” (“Le facteur de la vérité” 444).³¹ It should be evident that for conflictual aesthetics, and for every *conflictual reading*, there is no ultimate meaning of the text, but only the conflictual interweaving of the styles.

I do not intend to liquidate all of Derrida’s theory.³² However, having underlined some of the vital conquests of literary theory, I cannot but reaffirm the limitations of his proposals and the mistakes that should never be repeated:

- logocentrism must be understood not simply as the primacy of the One, but rather as the primacy of the pair “one/multiplicity.” Therefore, the overthrowing of the former category in favour of the latter does not change the framework of reference, but repropose the same logical space.

- Subordinating the analysis of a text to an intertextual analysis is tantamount to dissolving not only the autonomy and the closure, but also the complexity. From a methodological point of view, this is Derrida’s great mistake. So, his slogan should be overturned. We should say that “there is always an outside-text,” which implies no primacy of the historical context, but rather the primacy of the relationships between artefact and virtual object (the activity of interpretation).

- Are the interpretations of a text infinite? No, *doxa* is infinite, not the interpretation.

²⁹ The confusive is the logic of the Imaginary, and—being a *regime* and not a register—it is also the Imaginary in the Symbolic.

³⁰ As far as minister D. is concerned, he occupies this position only *virtually*, in case he should continue with the blackmail if he were to be challenged to exhibit the document that is still thought to be in his possession. “Thus will he inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 269).

³¹ For Derrida, the reading of Marie Bonaparte is even better than that of Lacan as it “relates *The Purloined Letter* to other texts by Poe” (“Le facteur de la vérité” 491). Here Derrida’s discourse verges on unintentional comedy.

³² As far as the more valid aspects of Derrida’s thought are concerned, I think I should mention the essays of Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, and Silvano Petrosino, *Jacques Derrida e la legge del possibile* (with a Preface by Derrida). Silvano Petrosino is also the author of *Contro la cultura. La letteratura, per fortuna*.

II. Meeting the Classics—Femininity and Flexibility

During our adolescence we have all read some literary classics for pleasure, and not because they were part of our reading assignment; and each of us will easily recall the emotions that some of the works aroused. In fact, reading Dante, Shakespeare or Dostoevsky when still relatively young is an unforgettable experience. Contextual knowledge did not play an important role in these circumstances: in the case of Dante, help is certainly given by the notes; but these notes are a minor aid, which fades away the moment we read the wonderful verses in the canto of Paolo and Francesca etc. As far as Dostoevsky is concerned, what does an adolescent know about Tsarist Russia? And what did we know about Argentina when we discovered Borges? I believe that amongst the definitions of literature, of art—and more in general of beauty—a place should be found for this statement: *art is what pleases without a context*.

Therefore *literature is the greatest refutation of contextualism*, for the very reason that, as a general rule, it is possible to encounter a work and to understand a great deal about it from the very first reading, undergo a profound emotional and intellectual experience without knowing almost anything about the genetic context (or about the receiving environment, that is to say the reactions of other real readers).

Undoubtedly, one could argue that there is no need for theory to appreciate the beauty of a work either. In fact, this is the case: theory is not a compulsory entranceway. Then again, human beings lived for many centuries unaware of the fundamental laws of physics or of biology: would we, therefore, deny the cognitive value of these sciences and the progress that they have accomplished?

Literary theory offers essential knowledge for various reasons:

- it makes a new and richer aesthetic experience possible compared with a spontaneous one. It offers adults the possibility of having a different experience to the one they had when they were adolescents. Conversely, contextual studies can only play an auxiliary role. They add information, including valuable details, but they are unable to provoke a new mental experience.

- It eliminates the barriers that prevented an understanding of works that were less easily accessible: during our adolescence, we were unable to love all the classics; we only established an immediate feeling with some of them. Theory enables us to enter the “labyrinth of linkages” of each text and to experience pleasure.

- When the obstacle to the aesthetic experience lies in very marked cultural differences, theory enables a distance that at first sight seems insuperable to be overcome. For example, why should we read a novel about a woman who is convicted of adultery, exposed to public reprobation and forced to wear a letter “A” sewn on the breast of her gown, as a symbol of her guilt? Is the society in which this event took place not perhaps far removed from our own? How can we identify ourselves with the torment of a young ecclesiastic who has had a relationship with this woman? Nowadays, no guilt is attached to sexual relations between consenting adults: and if the story narrated in *The Scarlet Letter* is judged from the point of view of our own morals, it seems to belong to another planet.

And yet Hawthorne’s novel is considered a classic, and as such a work with a “universal” meaning and value, if we want to use the language of former criticism and aesthetics. What does the universality of literature consist of? The proposal of values that everyone should share? Yes perhaps, in some cases: for example, Antigone, if she is seen to be the bearer of a higher law than positive law, in short what today we would call “human rights.” However, neither Hegel nor Lacan would agree with this interpretation. Furthermore: was such a complex character as Antigone necessary to proclaim very simple ethical principles such as everyone’s right to have burial rites? Do we still need this character? Would a hero of a television series not suffice nowadays? If the purpose of

literature were that of arousing empathy, especially with characters who suffer unjustly, as Marta Nussbaum claims (see *Not for Profit*), why do we not limit ourselves to simpler tales that are closer to our current society? What does Hamlet's universality consist of? In the need to avenge an unpunished crime? However, as Harold Bloom observed, to avenge a father any Fortinbras would do: it is not clear why Shakespeare wanted to construct a character of Hamlet's complexity (Bloom 4). Finally, perhaps we should consider other heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy, such as Medea, or characters from the European novel, like Lucien de Rubempré, as positive models?³³

There is a last, fundamental reason for abandoning (or at least downsizing) the notion of "universality," even with respect to the noblest characters. As a bearer of values, a character is inevitably considered to be someone who exemplifies and embodies properties coherent with such values. The point is this: can a complex identity (it does not matter whether it is real or fictitious) be defined satisfactorily by highlighting his or her properties? Traditional philosophy (that some call logocentrism) entrusted a privileged role to essentialist definitions: for Aristotle, man is a rational animal, this is where his specific difference lies. The poverty of definitions of this type should be obvious when we attempt to use them for literary characters, but also for real human beings.

Human beings are not "property-based" entities, in other words they cannot be defined in an adequate manner by using a greater or lesser list of properties. Their identity depends mainly on *relations* and on *modes*. For Heidegger, human beings should be thought of from the point of view of possibilities.³⁴ I believe that this is an irrevocable thesis, which should undoubtedly be extended to literature: *the identities that we meet in literary works belonging to the great time are interpretations of existential possibilities*.

Literature offers knowledge and not quick lessons on ethics and invitations to empathize. Literature investigates and portrays that *conflict that we ourselves are, in the many versions that it may assume*. However, the fundamental core of the conflict always involves the same forces, rigidity and flexibility. If we were rigid entities, the essentialist definitions would suffice to typecast us; as we are flexible, no definition can define us, unless it assumes the form of a paradox, of the link between opposites. Sometimes, the paradox is concentrated in an adjective: so, for Sophocles nothing is more *deinós* than a human being.³⁵ We must not let ourselves be tricked by grammatical appearances: *deinós* does not indicate a property, but an unstable and lacerated condition, an unrest that pushes us towards extremes and at times towards both extremes.

The more flexible beings are also *the more uncanny*.³⁶ There are no guarantees regarding their identity, there are no preset paths to salvation. If rigidity were always bad and flexibility always good, if we could block the conflict in an antithesis, our existence would be infinitely simpler. It would suffice to entrust ourselves to the fluidity of difference and foster otherness. Difference and otherness have become, inter alia, the watchwords of feminism, and here I would like to consider them first and foremost as *methodological indications*. Are women—the most different? Here is a non-essentialist definition that

³³ This did not prevent Wilde from affirming through one of his characters that "One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré" in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (*The Decay of Lying* 65).

³⁴ The thesis "Higher than actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] stands *possibility*" should chiefly be referred to human beings (see Heidegger, *Being and Time* 34).

³⁵ "Πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 332-33; "Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing uncannier than man bestirs itself"; trans. quoted from Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 156). *Deinós*: "terrifying, wonderful, uncanny."

³⁶ "Der Mensch ist mit *einem* Wort τὸ δεινότερον, das Unheimlichste" (Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* 114; "The human being is, in *one* word, *to deinotaton*, the uncanniest" [Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 156]).

certainly contains an element of truth. From the perspective of this essay, they are *the most flexible* (“Flexibility, thy name is woman,” we could say, referring to Shakespeare). It would be simplistic to oppose male rigidity to female flexibility, as conflict characterizes the human condition without distinction. Nevertheless, the vocation for flexibility is more marked on the female side: with all the dangers that it involves, because the “limit-surpassing” way of being is the noblest, but also the one most liable to failure. As we have already said, the will to not coincide may lead to definitive othernesses or in multiplicities that dissipate and paralyze the will to construct ourselves. A confusing relationship with a model may lead an individual beyond the limited boundaries of his or her existence: this is what happens in the case of Emma Bovary. Yet Emma’s *influencers* were female figures who dreamt of the absolute and, although they were stereotyped, they were capable of conveying to her the dream of a superior life. On the contrary, the most popular *influencers* today on the web are mimetic entities who trivialize existence: this does not prevent many women from identifying with them and experiencing the desire to be in the most conformist way.

When the reality in which we live produces endless effects of aridity, when life is downsized—despite the technologies that promise us an “augmented reality”—, in which forces and possibilities can we place our trust? Literature is one of these forces: it immerses actuality in the waters of possibility, it dilates the horizons of the present, it allows us to penetrate “augmented possibilities” as it shows the conflict between inferior and superior possibilities.

As a last example, I will choose *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel (as we observed above) set in a very different culture to our own, so much so that it makes us think that it belongs irretrievably to the past. This may be the immediate sensation of many readers: and cultural studies will certainly not contrast the laziness or erase the difficulties of those who would prefer to find themselves in more familiar worlds. And yet Hawthorne’s novel is more alive than a thousand contemporary novels set in contemporary times.

How can we perform a transposition of worlds that enables us to understand the density and richness of this work? It is not enough to empathize with poor Hester Prynne: we need to *interpret*. And a good interpretation may only arise from a *conflictual reading*. This expression does not simply mean the perception of conspicuous conflicts, like those between generations (between fathers and sons, etc.) or between social classes, those conflicts that even the less refined critics are able to sense and comment on. The object of the investigation is not the conflicts to which commonsense limits itself and which are privileged with a sociological or “cultural” glance.

Obviously, I cannot offer an adequate interpretation here, but I do believe that I can outline a perspective to be developed on another occasion. There is an unavoidable question, that is no less important than those of the Russian Formalists: *was the protagonist of the text that we intend to analyze faithful to his/her desire?*³⁷ In order not to misunderstand this question, it is important to remember that (a) desire derives from our plasticity, and, therefore, there is no original nucleus to which we can return, there is no ballast that can permanently stabilize our identity; (b) desire is always enigmatic: it is an “x” to be interpreted; consequently, faithfulness to our own desire should not be banally understood as the justification for every immediate impulse. Instead, this principle invites us to reflect on our own possibilities, in the awareness that we have to look at the future and not at the past: as in the case of a work of art, it is only at the end that its nobility and beauty can be judged.

Was Hester Prynne faithful to her desire? *Does her identity correspond to a limit-surpassing way of being?* This second wording clarifies the first. Hawthorne’s novel

³⁷ See Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

depicts the conflict between the will of a puritan community which intends to nail Hester to her guilt, to the point where she becomes an allegorical emblem, and the resistance victoriously exerted by a woman condemned to solitude, but who finds in the solitude the resources to go beyond the stereotypes of her time:

For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. (Hawthorne 186)

However, if we were to limit ourselves to opposing the severity of the Puritan conception in order to demand a freedom that is nowadays entirely normal, Hester would exemplify the second of the “three metamorphoses of the spirit” stated by Nietzsche at the beginning of *Zarathustra*: she would have surpassed the condition of the camel, the bearer of pre-set values (in her case, being the bearer of the letter *A*), she would express rebellion and new values (the figure of the lion). Taking a close look, Hawthorne’s character is far more complex as she does not offer a new, more tolerant ethics of Law, but rather *an ethics of form*: and from this point of view, she is a Nietzschean character. The ethics of form cannot be founded on impersonal rules, but only on the interpretation of the possibilities to which an individual has been obscurely delivered, in which he or she has been thrown (Heidegger would say), and by analyzing them he or she may conquer their own individuality.

The first fundamental conflict in *The Scarlet letter* places two concepts of ethics in opposition. The second conflict occurs in the dimension of the allegory, and therefore, of the language. In this respect, what do we learn from literature if not, more than anything else, that *language is divided*? The diagram of par. 9 should be recalled, illustrating the rain of styles: thanks to the splits and the conflict, we are also able to understand the interweaving better. In any case, if language is divided, could allegory remain *undivided*? Certainly not. So, what is the real alternative that we have to examine? The difference between a rigid and unequivocal allegory, based on conventions and stereotypes (it does not really matter if they are handed down or not), and a polysemic, perhaps even doxastic allegory which offers itself to any decoding? Once again, we reject the naïve over-emphasis of the multiple, from which the multiplication of the rigid (and not flexibility!) follows and the proliferation of unselected opinions.

The Puritans would like to reduce Hester to a symbol of guilt: they would like to impose a *synecdochic restriction* on her, like those that we encounter in the depictions of the Vices and the Virtues. As Hester cannot be modified physically, that is to say the Puritan community cannot force a woman to correspond to a concept, as a medieval painter could have done, she is forced to sew a signifier on her dress that is anything but mysterious. And it is against this restriction that Hester rebels. Her battle concerns the linguistic dimension, and the power that language holds to inscribe itself on the flesh. The letter burns like a brand. And yet, although Hester accepts her identification with the letter, she modifies its meaning and function: from that encoded signifier, she unleashes new energy, new possibilities. She manages to make her psyche into a battleground between two allegorical attitudes.

The intertwining of the problem of identity and language should be noted. Hester refuses a rigid and synecdochic identification, not simply in favor of the polysemy (*A* will stand for “Able,” etc.), but rather in favor of the metaphor. We have mentioned several times that a complex identity cannot be reduced to a list of properties (nor to a set of parts: a mereologic conception), but it is the *relations* forming it that should be analyzed. We must overlook the relations with Dimmesdale and with Chillingworth: let us consider the

relations with Pearl. Mother and daughter metamorphize each other reciprocally, in a relationship of alliance which is the main source of salvation for Hester Prynne. Pearl is an unstable identity oscillating between form and lack of form: this girl, who is a plurality of girls,³⁸ expresses the uneasy energy of the principle of metamorphosis, and, therefore, the need to identify oneself with an otherness. Absolute instability would be unbearable, we are condemned to assume some sort of form. The first form to offer itself to Pearl's gaze is the scarlet letter on Hester's chest (Hawthorne 89-90). This first identification is followed by numerous others: the girl is attracted by mirrors and by reflections, by shiny surfaces that reflect her image: a bright armour, the stream in the forest, and always, inexorably, the letter that gives an identity to her mother, so much so that when Hester removes it, Pearl demands that the A be replaced. As she belongs more to the Imaginary than to the Symbolic, she is disobedient and irreverent. And Hester is even more so than Pearl, because in rebelling she has the chance to transfer her mind to unknown spaces; but the alliance with her daughter is decisive. Identifying herself with her daughter, Hester absorbs her disorderly life force. Pearl is the letter itself: "See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?" (Hawthorne 104). The girl reverses the direction of the allegory and its unambiguity: if the gaze of official allegorism interprets Pearl by means of the scarlet letter, we can interpret the letter by means of Pearl and her traits: mobility, polymorphism, a mixture of innocence and perversity, etc.

There is yet another conflict to be disclosed, the one between intelligence and stupidity. While philosophers have almost always circumvented the problem of *bêtise*, literature has perhaps never been able to ignore it. Errors and their causes—how can we disregard their importance in literary narration? In Greek tragedy, the term *amartía* means not so much ethical guilt as an intellectual blindness. While we are reluctant to judge the error of a tragic hero as the consequence of an intellectual deficit, due to the fact that his error is often "necessary" (in a sense that needs to be specified), we have no doubts when recognizing stupidity in comedy or in the novel. *Literature of the great time offers extra-moral knowledge*: it never bows to the ethical device, to its obviousness and to its rigidity, and never hesitates to denounce the stupidity of Good. In *The Scarlet Letter*, we not only encounter Hester's mental audacity, but also Chillingworth's perverse intellect. We know to what tortures he exposes Dimmesdale, in whom he senses Hester's beloved, and who already suffers from a sense of guilt. Hawthorne's novel demonstrates the daunting propensity towards *bêtise*, which characterizes the human condition. It is society itself that has condemned the adulterer, it is the friends of the clergyman, who is admired by everyone for his theological knowledge and his ascetic fervor, that deliver him to Chillingworth. The continual worsening of his health enables this suggestion to be accepted:

After a time, at a hint from Roger Chillingworth, the friends of Mr. Dimmesdale effected an arrangement by which the two were lodged in the same house; so that every ebb and flow of the minister's life-tide might pass under the eye of his anxious and attached physician. There was much joy throughout the town, when this great desirable object was attained. (Hawthorne 115)

The blindness of good—but is it really good?—reaches its apex. Now the tiger only has to stretch out its claws. It will do so, only after rummaging at length in its victim's psyche, driven by a terrible covetousness.

³⁸ "In this one child there were many children" (Hawthorne 84).

12. Brief Conclusion

My manifesto is addressed not only to colleagues, but also to students: I hope to have offered something useful to those who are beginning their course of studies, and for those who are beginning to realize how inadequate the university teaching that privileges contextual studies is and for those who, in any case, do not consider them to be “auxiliary studies.” However, I would not want the criticism of contextualism to be understood as a total devaluation of the historical approach: more specifically, I believe that the historical viewpoint is legitimate when it does not oppose theory; and vice versa, theory as it is understood here tends to include, and certainly not exclude, history.

Moreover, the primacy of *conflictual reading* does not aim at demeaning the results of *close reading*: attention to style has already been commended. As for the various forms of *distant reading*, the reconstructions of underlying systems attempted by semiotics (consider, for example, the semiotics of the culture proposed by Lotman) certainly continue to be appreciable. The distance from the text may vary, in the same way as the physical distance separating an observer looking at a painting: but only the glance, which is able to penetrate the conflictual interweaving of styles, will be able to introduce the richness of the text, its virtualities.

Finally, and as much as my affirmation may seem surprising in a manifesto in favour of theory, I would like to express once more all my admiration to the authors who have been able to propose refined readings of the texts without applying an explicit instrumentation. They are rare cases, and, what is more, their likelihood derives from an *implicit* choice, the primacy of style, and from the fascination for what is essential in the aesthetic experience, in other words, to quote Wilde, from the awareness that “Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “Preface”).

There is nothing strictly Cartesian in the notion of “method” used up until now. However, there is the proposal for a course of training that the University should offer and which recognizes the importance of theory, techniques, problems and analytical tools.

I have tried to formulate my theses in the clearest possible way, and not only for the purpose of making them more easily accessible. Today, a hermetic and allusive style of writing, like that of the last century, is not feasible for readers who are, in general, far more impatient; but this is not the only reason. It is necessary to recognize the limitations of a hermetic style of writing, even the most fascinating, that is likely to hinder a more rigorous and even a more creative analysis. Even the greatest authors of the twentieth century stumbled several times owing to the laces with which their shoes were tied without distinction. Therefore, precision and the art of distinction seem to be essential and advantageous choices.

I am aware of the succinctness of my argument, however I hope to have found the right balance to be able to convey how precious and engrossing literary theory actually is. In my opinion, none of the theses that I have expounded should be considered irrelevant.

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