
Forme is power.


Introductions always get written last, perhaps years after some of the work they are supposed to ‘introduce’. Rereading one’s own work, one immediately notices mistakes and gaps, the ideas that seem so obvious now but which then – God knows why – seemed impossible to grasp. One would like to discard everything and start afresh – or at least look forward, not back, and pursue what has not yet been done, without worrying about making presentable what has long since been left behind.

In short, immediately one starts writing an introduction, one wants to write the exact opposite of an introduction. I have tried to resist this impulse, then to subdue it, then to disguise it. But I might as well admit to feeling that this introduction has rather run away from me. I do not even know whether it is a good idea to read it before the other essays. Not that it has nothing to do with them: on the contrary, it tackles precisely those theoretical problems that continually recur in the book. But there are two differences of some substance in the way it deals with them.

For one thing, this is my first attempt at a systematic and abstract discussion of issues that I have always approached in an occasional, intuitive and concrete way: in relation to a specific text or literary genre. And while I am convinced that empirical research is impossible without a guiding theoretical framework, I am by no means sure that I am personally cut out for this sort of work. I feel more at home examining, correcting or falsifying already existing theories in the light of concrete examples than when I have to put forward an alternative theory. Ideally, of course, the two operations ought to coincide: but in reality one finds oneself ‘specializing’ in one or other of them, and I must say that the operation I find more congenial is the one found in the essays that follow, not the one attempted in this introduction. On the other hand, in the rather frenetic world of literary criticism, theoretical speculation enjoys the same symbolic
status as cocaine: one has to try it. Readers will judge for themselves whether in my case it has been worthwhile or whether they have simply had dust thrown in their eyes.

The second difference is much simpler and much more important. Over the past few years I have changed my opinion on various questions. In a couple of cases, which I shall mention explicitly, I now think that I was wrong. Overall, though, I would say that I have mainly radicalized and generalized a number of intuitions scattered here and there in my earlier work. It may be that they have thereby gained in clarity and explanatory power, or it may be that they have lost what was good in their original formulation. I (predictably) lean towards the former view, but it is, as always, other people’s judgements that count. I simply wanted to state at the outset that the discrepancies between one essay and the next, and between essays and introduction, derive at least in part from the fact that I am unable to consider my work as something complete; that no methodological or historiographic framework wholly convinces me; and that every change I have made has been prompted by the unfashionable and banal conviction that the main task of criticism is to provide the best possible explanation of the phenomena it discusses. That is all; now we can get on with the real problems.

1. Rhetoric and History

“Rhetoric is like a branch [...] of the science dealing with behaviour, which it is right to call political”. Aristotle’s words (Rhetoric, 1356a) prefigure those researches of the last few decades aimed at demonstrating that rhetorical conventions exist in order to satisfy specifically social requirements. Thus Kenneth Burke in 1950: “The Rhetoric must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counter-pressure, the logomachy, the onus of ownership, the Wars of Nerves, the War. [...] Its ideal culminations are more often beset by strife as the condition of their organized expression, or material embodiment. Their very universality becomes transformed into a partisan weapon. For one need not scrutinize the concept of ‘identification’ very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division. Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall. Its contribution to a ‘sociology of knowledge’ must often carry us far into the lugubrious regions of malice and lie“².
Rhetoric has a social, emotive, partisan character, in short, an *evaluative* character. To persuade is the opposite of to convince. The aim is not to ascertain an intersubjective truth but to enlist support for a *particular* system of values. In the seventeenth century – which witnessed the first great flowering of empirical science, and *at the same time* the collapse of all social ‘organicity’ in the fight to the death between opposing faiths and interest – the perception of this contrast was extremely acute. According to *La Logique de Port-Royal*: “Si l’on examine avec soin ce qui attache ordinairement les hommes plutôt à une opinion qu’à une autre, on trouvera que ce n’est pas la pénétration de la vérité & la force des raisons ; mais quelque lien d’amour propre, d’intérêt, ou de passion. C’est le poids qui emporte la balance, & qui nous détermine dans la plupart de nos doutes ; c’est ce qui donne le plus grand branle à nos jugements, & qui nous y arrête le plus fortement. Nous jugeons des choses, non par ce qu’elles sont en elles-mêmes ; mais par ce qu’elles sont à notre égard : & la vérité & l’utilité ne sont pour nous qu’une même chose”\(^3\).

So far we have discussed the social character of rhetorical conventions. But the argument applies also to literary conventions. Rhetoric is concerned with so many and such different activities (law, politics, ethics, advertising…) that it would be mistaken to restrict it just to literature, yet literary discourse is entirely contained within the rhetorical domain. As Preti puts it in a flawless passage: “Epideictic discourse, which was the least valued in antiquity (precisely because it is the most… ‘rhetorical’ in a derogatory sense) is nowadays however the one which takes on the greatest importance. It can even be said that in present-day philosophy of culture it is the only one with any interest, precisely because it does not have narrow practical ends, but a cultural, ‘paedeutic’ aim. And above all because it provides the *genus* of literary discourse in prose. It bears on moral values, and in general on the values of a civilization. It aims at reinforcing or arousing attitudes (feelings) not just as regards a contingent (legal or political) decision, but as regards the great values that make up a civilization. Precisely because of its non-practical character, it is unlikely to degenerate from a discourse of persuasion to one of propaganda. It is above all the structures and rules of this kind of discourse which are the object of the new Rhetoric”\(^4\).

The evaluative and persuasive character of literary discourse emerges sharply in that area of the rhetorical tradition with which literary criticism is most familiar, namely ‘figures’, and particularly in the ‘queen of poetry’ – metaphor. Far from being ‘aesthetic’ ornaments of discourse, places where the strategy of persuasion is attenuated or disappears, figures show themselves to be unrivalled mechanisms for
welding into an indivisible whole description and evaluation, ‘judgements of fact’ and ‘judgements of value’. To quote once again La Logique de Port-Royal: “Les expressions figurées signifient, outre la chose principale, le mouvement & la passion de celui qui parle, & impriment ainsi l’une & l’autre idée dans l’esprit, au lieu que l’expression simple ne marque que la vérité toute nue”\(^5\).

‘Passion’, the ‘emotions’, ‘feeling’: these indicate that uncertain object that literary criticism can choose to ignore but which does not thereby disappear from its field of operation. As Pascal said, feeling “acts in a flash, and is always ready to act”. He traced it back in ‘habit’, to that ‘spontaneous’ cultural reaction (“we are automatism as well as spirit...”) which tells us with ruthless clarity just how profoundly our psychical apparatus is determined by the socio-historical context.

Rhetoric, then, addresses itself to ‘feeling’ precisely because it is concerned with evoking and disciplining the most purely social parts of us. The most ‘automatically’ social, we should say, with Pascal in mind, but also recalling the theory of metaphor put forward by Max Black. Metaphor for Black appears as simply unthinkable outside a whole system of moral and cognitive commonplaces (rhetoric, as Aristotle had said, is the art of using commonplaces well) which are used and accepted without any longer being subjected to any control: “Consider the statement ‘man is a wolf’ [...] The metaphorical sentence in question will not convey its intended meaning to a reader sufficiently ignorant about wolves. What is needed is not so much that the reader shall know the standard dictionary meaning of ‘wolf’ – or be able to use that word in literal senses – as that he shall know what I will call the system of associated commonplaces [...] From the expert’s standpoint, the system of commonplaces may include half-truths or downright mistakes (as when a whale is classified as a fish); but the important thing for the metaphor’s effectiveness is not that the commonplaces shall be true, but that they should be readily and freely evoked. (Because this is so, a metaphor that works in one society may seem preposterous in another)”\(^6\).

Seen in this light, the more a rhetorical formulation is turned into a commonplace (or rather – but it is the same thing – the more it has become ‘implicit’, unnoticeable to us) the more persuasive it will be: “To us it seems that the value of ‘dead’ metaphors in argument is above all prominent because of the great force of persuasion they possess when, with the aid of one technique or another, they are put back into action. This force results from the fact that they draw their effects from an analogic material which is easily admitted because it is not only known, but integrated, by means of language,
Rhetorical figures, and the larger combinations which organize long narratives, are thus of a piece with the deep, buried, invisible presuppositions of every world view. This is why one duly turns to them every time one has to put into focus a particularly complex experience (one can practically speak about time only in metaphors) or to express a judgement that possesses particular importance (almost all emotional language – from ‘honey’ to ‘scum’ and beyond – is a long chain of metaphors). I said just now that rhetorical forms are ‘of a piece’ with the deepest presuppositions of every Weltanschauung. The examples just adduced invite us to go further, to suggest that they are the most widespread form, and in certain cases the only form, in which those presuppositions continue to manifest themselves. Their lasting and undetected effectivenes points to the wide field of study of the unconscious culture, the implicit knowledge, of every civilization. It has indeed become difficult to imagine an adequate social history of ‘consensus’ that does not understand the techniques of persuasion. Reciprocally, literary criticism – as a sociology of rhetorical forms – would have everything to gain from contact with the history of mentalities outlined by the Annales school: “Inertia, a fundamental historical force, [...] is more a fact of minds than one of matter, since the latter is often quicker to act than the former. Men make use of the machines they invent while retaining the mentality of prior technical stages. Drivers of motor-cars have a horse-rider’s vocabulary, nineteenth-century factory workers have the mentality of their peasant fathers and grandfathers. Mentality is what changes most slowly. The history of mentalities is the history of slowness in history”9. Yet it would of course be wrong to say that literature is limited to ‘bringing back to life’ the rhetorico-ideological forms already deposited in tradition. Literature is traversed by continuous, at times traumatic, innovation: ‘daring’ figures, works that on their appearance were rejected as ‘incomprehensible’ or ‘absurd’ are the most visible evidence of this second side of the question. Yet this does not in the least ‘prove’ – as is often believed, for the most varied reasons – that ‘real’ literature is by its nature anti-conventional, and that its interpretation will therefore impel us ‘beyond’ rhetorical analysis.

Let us begin with the second point. Rhetorical theory is by no means unable to account for the evolutionary character or even the ruptures of literary history. Harald Weinrich’s analysis of metaphor in text-linguistic terms aims precisely at explaining the culturally innovative function that it can, if necessary, come to exercise. Indeed when Weinrich notes that metaphor is a ‘contradictory predication’, he shows that the
relation between ‘topic’ and ‘comment’, or subject and predicate, established by metaphorical combination is never, originally, a ‘peaceful’ one but always implies a ‘risky’ transition between the two terms. It is no longer a question, then, of contrasting rhetorical (or ideological) ‘consent’ with aesthetic ‘dissent’, but of recognizing that there are different moments in the development of every system of consent, and above all different ways of furthering it. As I try to explain in the essays on Joyce, Eliot and Balzac – and in the fourth section of this introduction – in particular social contexts even ‘open’, ‘non-organic’, or ‘obscure’ aesthetic forms can function as instruments of consent.

Knowledge of the socio-historical context of a literary work or genre is not therefore an ‘extra’ to be kept in the margins of rhetorical analysis. In general, whether one is aware of it or not, such knowledge furnishes the starting point for interpretation itself, providing it with those initial hypothesis without which rhetorical mechanisms would be hard to understand, or would tell us very little indeed. Thus, when around ten years ago every work was implacably led back to the Nature/Culture opposition, the procedure soon wore thin, not so much because of its historical indeterminacy, but because that indeterminacy (largely encouraged by Lévi-Strauss himself) permitted as a rule analyses that were at best elementary, and otherwise simply wrong.

Yet, although rhetorical analysis refines and extends the territory of the social sciences and the latter, for their part, provide it with that historical framework outside of which the very existence of rhetorical conventions would be meaningless, it should not therefore be thought that the connection between the two conceptual apparatuses, and the set of phenomena they refer to, is linear and predictable. True isomorphisms never occur, and from this categorial discrepancy stems the set of problems that characterizes literary history.

2. Literary Historiography – and Beyond

Literary texts are historical products organized according to rhetorical criteria. The main problem of a literary criticism that aims to be in all respects a historical discipline is to do justice to both aspects of its objects: to work out a system of concepts which are both historiographic and rhetorical. These would enable one to perform a dual operation: to slice into segments the diachronic continuum constituted by the whole set of literary texts (the strictly historical task), but to slice it according to formal criteria pertaining to that continuum and not others (the strictly rhetorical task).
To a large extent, such a theoretical apparatus already exists. It is centred on the concept of ‘literary genre’. I do not think it is accidental that, in the twentieth century, the best results of historical-sociological criticism are to be found in works aimed at defining the internal laws and historical range of a specific genre: from the novel in Lukács to the baroque drama in Benjamin, from French classical tragedy in Goldmann to (in a kindred field) the twelve-note system in Adorno. Yet there is no doubt that the concept of literary genre has not yet acquired the prominence it deserves, or that it could lead to a very different structuring of literary history from the one familiar to us. I would like here to outline some of the prospects that might open up if it were to be used systematically. But first I shall suggest why criticism has put up such widespread resistance to these developments.

Let us take the case of the young Lukács. In the period when he was working on his *Modern Drama*, Lukács, under the influence of Simmel’s sociology of forms, had come to formulate the problem we are concerned with in terms that still remain valid today. As he wrote in the 1911 foreword to that work: “The fundamental problem of this book is therefore: does a modern drama exist, and what style does it have? This question, however, like every stylistic question, is in the first place a sociological one [...]. The greatest errors of sociological analysis in relation to art are: in artistic creations it seeks and examines only contents, tracing a straight line between these and given economic relations. But in literature what is truly social is form [...]. Form is social reality, it participates vivaciously in the life of the spirit. It therefore does not operate only as a factor acting upon life and moulding experiences, but also as a factor which is in its turn moulded by life.”

This line of research is very clear, and far richer than a couple of quotations can hope to suggest. One almost wonders what form sociological criticism might have taken had Lukács pursued his project. But, of course, things turned out differently. Already in 1910, in disconcerting synchrony with the arguments just quoted, Lukács elaborated a diametrically opposed concept of aesthetic form – a ‘tragic’ concept, based on the collapse of all connections between form and life, forms and history: “[Here] a fundamental question arises for aesthetics: is not what we have been accustomed to call form, and which we place a priori in front of the meanings of life and of what is being formed, the petrifaction of existence? [...] Every perfect work, precisely because of its perfection, places itself outside all communities and will not tolerate being inserted into some series of causes determining it from without. The essence of artistic creation, of formation, is just such an isolating principle: to cut every bond which tied it
to living, concrete, moving life in order to give itself a new life, closed in on itself, not connected to anything and comparable to nothing. In every artistic creation there exists a kind of *Inselhaftigkeit*, as Simmel calls it, as a result of which it is reluctant to be a part of any continuous development”\(^{15}\).

As is well known, between *Soul and Forms* and *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács radicalized this second version of his concept of form. In the famous dialogue on *Tristram Shandy* the speaker who exalts formal order frightens the girl he loves and drives her into his rival’s arms. By the same token, in *Theory of the Novel* the *historicity* which is consubstantial with the novel means that the formal accomplishment of a novel is always and only ‘problematic’: a ‘yearning’ for form rather than its attainment. Between Life and Form, history and forms, the young Lukács digs an ever-deepening trench. Life is ‘movement’, form ‘closure’. Life is ‘concreteness’ and ‘multiplicity’, form ‘abstraction’ and ‘simplification’. Form is, in a summarizing metaphor, petrified and petrifying: life is fluid, ductile, ‘alive’.

However, the twentieth-century social sciences have erased this image of life for good. If one looks through the eyes of linguistics, history of the *longue durée*, anthropology and psychoanalysis, even life appears ‘petrified’. What is unacceptable in Lukács’s dichotomy is not so much the description of form as the characteristics attributed to historical existence. If, in Lukács’s work between 1910 and 1920, the concept of form takes on increasingly metaphysical connotations, this happens, paradoxically, less for reasons internal to the concept of form itself than because of the image Lukács’s philosophical background had imprinted on the opposing concept. Form coagulates into a cruel a priori – extreme, tragic, opposed to life – *because* Lukács wants to conserve ‘life’ in a state of fluid and ‘open’ indeterminacy. What Lukác’s is aiming to avoid is a concept which is, however, essential to the analysis of culture: the concept of *convention*\(^{16}\). It is a crucial concept because it indicates when a form has taken definitive social root, entering into daily life, innervating and organizing it in ways increasingly undetected and regular – and hence more effective. But it is at the same time a concept which enforces a harsh disillusionment, because it strips historical existence of its openness to change, and aesthetic form of its pristine purity.

I believe that literary criticism has kept for too long to the terms of Lukács’s dilemma: to save the warmth of life and the purity of form. This is why history and rhetoric have become totally unrelated subjects. This is why the concept of literary genre has remained confined to a sort of theoretical limbo: recognized and accepted, but little
and reluctantly used. To talk about literary genres means without any doubt to emphasize the contribution made by literature to the ‘petrifaction of existence’ and also to the ‘wearing out of form’. It means re-routing the tasks of literary historiography and the image of literature itself, enclosing them both in the idea of consent, stability, repetition, bad taste even. It means, in other words, turning the ultimate paradise – the paradise of ‘beauty’ – into a social institution like the others.

We can now return to the role of the concept of genre in slicing up and reordering the continuum of literary history. Something immediately strikes us. A history of literature built round this concept will be both ‘slower’ and more ‘discontinuous’ than the one we are familiar with. Slower, because the idea of literary genre itself requires emphasis on what a set of works have in common. It presupposes that literary production takes place in obedience to a prevailing system of laws and that the task of criticism is precisely to show the extent of their coercive, regulating power. The idea of genre introduces into literary history the dimension which the Annales school has called longue durée, and supports the hypothesis that “art is without doubt more suited to the expression of states of civilization than moments of violent rupture”17.

This is a change of perspective whose consequences it is difficult, and in part also idle, to predict. But one thing is certain: it will force one to re-examine from the foundations upwards the historiographical status of literary criticism. Tottering and obsolete in this respect, literary history has never ceased to be histoire événementielle, where the ‘events’ are great works or great individuals. Even the great historical controversies, when all is said, turn almost exclusively on the reinterpretation of an extremely small number of works and authors. This procedure condemns the concept of genre to a subaltern, marginal function, as is indicated most starkly in the formalist couple convention-defamiliarization, where genre appears as mere background, an opaque plane whose only use is to make the difference of the masterpiece more prominent. Just as the ‘event’ breaks and ridicules the laws of continuity, so the masterpiece is there to demonstrate the ‘triumph’ over the norm, the irreducibility of what is really great.

The problems here are many and intertwined. But keeping to the essential, let us at least ask two questions. First, how far has empirical research borne out the antithesis between norm and masterpiece on which literary historiography continues to rest? In what sense does Shakespeare ‘violate’ the conventions of Elizabethan tragedy? Why not say the opposite: that he was the only writer able to realize them fully, establishing
as it were the ‘ideal type’ of an entire genre? Does *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* ‘defamiliarize’ the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*? Is not the opposite the case: that with his novel Goethe founds them and makes them reproducible? Examples could be multiplied. Here again, in essence, is the problem we dealt with in discussing the relation between the ‘commonplace’ and the ‘daring’ in rhetoric. What is at issue once more is the orientation of the historian’s gaze: whether one should look only at what is *behind* the masterpiece, unilaterally emphasizing a break, a rupture of the historical tissue – or whether, by showing the consequences of every great work, one should accentuate its function as a genuine producer of historical ‘stability’.

It seems evident to me that the first orientation is still the more common; and the reason is not hard to find. The fact is that criticism has not entirely freed itself of its old task: that of being a sort of cultivated accompaniment to reading – to the reading we are doing here and now. Since certain works continue to be read, the desire spontaneously arises of showing that they are ‘contemporary’, and thus of emphasizing what allows them to be wrenched out of the hard earth of the past and laid in our lap. This betokens a relationship with texts whose distant roots lie in Greek, and above all in Christian allegorical exegesis. It is based on the belief, however banalized nowadays, that there are messages in the past that not only concern us but which in a sense were written *for us and us alone*, and whose meaning will be fully revealed only in the light of our exegesis. An agreeable superstition indeed and a highly useful one ‘for life’: but for precisely this reason it concerns the student of the contemporary mentality, not the historian. The latter – unless desirous of turning into that legendary figure whose only pleasure lay in contemplating his own reflection – must concentrate on the dissimilarities and ruptures: on what has been lost and become irremediably unfamiliar, and which we can ‘re-familiarize’ only by doing such violence to it that we distort the objective, material consistency of every work which it is the task of scientific knowledge to reconstruct and ‘salvage’.

The improper and distorting centrality that contemporary ‘taste’ has won at the expense of historical criticism brings us to the second question. At the end of the nineteenth century hundreds of ghost stories were written, but *The Turn of the Screw* is something else. Agreed; or rather, it is something else ‘for us’, the tiny minority that acts in each case as the depository of prevailing taste. But is the task of the historian of culture always and only to ask what, in the past or the present, makes possible the ‘separation’ of an elite from the mass of the public? Is it not rather to deal with the mass conventions, the great ideological agreements by which each age is
distinguished from others? But – it might be objected – the average production of a given genre is unreadable and boring now. I do not doubt it. But it is precisely this unbearable ‘uncontemporaneity’ that the historian must seek out. (We might reflect in passing that if everyone behaved like literary critics who only study what they ‘like’, doctors might restrict themselves to studying only healthy bodies and economists the standard of living of the well-off.) And then, are we so sure that we know those ‘other’ ghost stories, the ‘conventional’ ones? Have these conventions really been studied, or do we not rather confine ourselves to evoking them hurriedly for the sole purpose of adding lustre to their ‘destroyer’? If one wants to keep the couple convention-innovation and give the latter term the full historical and formal weight it deserves, it is all the more important to realize that the first term of the pair has not yet become an ‘object of knowledge’ in a true sense for literary criticism. The idea of ‘normal literature’ – to paraphrase another Annales expression – has no place in criticism. The result is that, at present, our knowledge of literary history closely resembles the maps of Africa of a century and a half ago: the coastal strips are familiar but an entire continent is unknown. Dazzled by the great estuaries of mythical rivers, when it comes to pinpointing the source we still trust too often to bizarre hypotheses or even to legends.

Faced with an unknown continent, one does not of course know beforehand whether it is going to be worth exploring. I can only say that each time I have studied ‘low’ genres, ‘mass literature’ (and despite having done it in a way I no longer find satisfactory: looking for their laws of operation in a single work I thought was exemplary – Dracula, The Paul Street Boys, the Sherlock Holmes cycle – and not in a broader and more systematic corpus of ‘middle-range’ products) I have always ended up finding meanings that were in no sense ‘predictable’ or ‘banal’. Very often, in fact, they were different or even antithetical to what one generally supposes at first sight.

Mass literature is not the undifferentiated and meaningless expanse most critics – still – say it is. It holds many surprises, and not just because of the meanings within it, but also because of the light it sheds on works of a different kind. The rhetoric of the detective story enables us to understand better the formal and cultural problematic on which the narrative solutions of Joseph Conrad (which are opposed to those of the detective story) depend. Reading Baudelaire in the light of Bram Stoker, one finds that the function of the oxymoron takes on unexpected connotations. In the essays on mass literature collected here, unfortunately, this aspect of the question is insufficiently developed. Only a few years ago, to write about Dracula meant being
taken for an eccentric loafer, and one’s main worry was to prove that one’s work was legitimate: “You see: *Dracula* is part of literary history *too*”. To wonder whether the study of Stoker might contribute towards changing the contours of ‘great’ literature was really going a bit too far. But I am convinced now that this is a path to pursue, and that it will perhaps allow us to reconstruct the literary system of the past with great theoretical precision and historical fidelity.

A ‘slower’ literary history; and a more ‘discontinuous’ one. At present, criticism relies on too many and too varied criteria in order to slice up the continuum of history: the individual author’s life, ‘style-period’ concepts like mannerism or naturalism, the ruptures occurring in other areas of history, the explicit or implicit recourse to an all-pervasive ‘Spirit of the age’ – as well as, naturally, the concept of genre itself. The end result is in most cases a large and sticky web where historical breaks lose all clarity. If the concept of literary genre can be elaborated pertinently and systematically, it might contribute towards hardening the edges of historical research, since a history redrawn according to strictly formal principles will also be a more rigid, more interrupted history. Not only (as is already partly the case) on the diachronic plane, but also and perhaps above all on the synchronic: in every age, different and even mutually conflicting symbolic forms coexist, each one endowed with a different diffusion and historical duration. The history of literature must aim to represent its own object as a kind of magnetic field whose overall equilibrium or disequilibrium is only the resultant of the individual forces acting within it.

It is even possible that the distinctive features of the artistic or literary ‘periods’ themselves will emerge profoundly modified from this re-examination, but this is to raise questions that I cannot tackle here\(^{19}\). Instead it should be noted that, if one wants to arrive at a historical reordering of any interest and validity, the concept of ‘genre’ will have to be elaborated in a much more pertinent way than it is now. At present, in fact, it mixes more or less at random references to content (detective story, picaresque novel), to effects (terror, humour), and to a number of formal features (stories ‘with happy endings’, ‘documentary’ novels). Such a loose classification cannot make much of a contribution towards simplifying and specifying a field of research. Perhaps the solution will be to concentrate on certain major rhetorical ‘dominants’ and reorganize the system of the different genres on the basis of these. I have a specific example in mind, which to me seems the most successful attempt to found a ‘rhetorical’ historiography: Erwin Panofsky’s “Perspective as a ‘Symbolic Form’”.
Reading this essay one understands first of all how ‘strong’ historical hypotheses contribute to rhetorical research (‘iconological’ research in Panofsky’s case), not only by fortifying it but also by offering it preliminary structural hypotheses. In other words one understand the unity of historical and rhetorical study. But one also grasps the distinction between them: those preliminary hypotheses are in fact only corroborated after a long and arduous march through highly specialized territories, where the analysis is carried out (and offers itself for refutation) on the basis of principles which can no longer be deduced from the extra-artistic historical knowledges. This is the necessarily ‘tortuous’ way in which criticism contributes to overall historical knowledge, and I shall return to this shortly. Let us dwell for the moment on another aspect of “Perspective” that may turn out to be essential for a renewal of historical methodology. As is well known, Panofsky believes that pictorial perspective emerges in relation to a new concept of space and of the ‘ordering’ function the human subject comes to assume within it. This concept originated in experimental physics and was given its definitive codification in Kantian philosophy. Thus an artistic procedure takes on its fullest significance in the light not of other artistic phenomena but of the products of scientific and philosophical thought. In fact it is in correlation with the latter that its ‘form’ becomes comprehensible and reveals its own cultural function. But in that case, a history of rhetorical forms carried through to its logical conclusion will very probably lead to the dismemberment of the aesthetic field. And this dismemberment will no longer take the historicist form of bracketing off the technical peculiarities of works so as to fuse them into a generic ‘Spirit of the Age’. Rather, it is precisely from the materiality of their form that criticism will derive the theoretical need to ‘unfix’ the histories of art and of literature, and rewrite them as merely a component of a history of values, of the structures of thought in which these values are organized and of the institutions designed to promote them.

An example will help to clarify what I mean. The Elizabethan sonnet and the roman-feuilleton both belong to the area of literature, and are ‘therefore’ both dealt with by the same discipline, literary criticism. But things belong to the same field and are studied by the same discipline if their characteristics are held largely in common. Now the sonnet and the feuilleton certainly share that double negation by which Kant marked off the aesthetic sphere: they do not have a cognitive character, and they do not have immediate practical ends. But that is all. They have nothing else in common. And anyone who studies sonnets or feuilletons knows very well that their common ‘aesthetic function’ provides little or no help in interpreting them. A study of the sonnet will set no store by the critical categories valid for the feuilleton. It will draw
instead on ‘kindred’ conventions to the sonnet, without these necessarily having to belong to the literary sphere: certain forms of prayer for example, or certain aspects of heraldic custom, or the theory of ‘world harmony’. Conversely, in the case of the *feuilleton*, one will have to study early to mid-nineteenth-century journalism; post-Revolutionary melodrama, the conventions of a certain kind of ‘popular’ historiography. In both cases the work will proceed that much better the more the person conducting it – without knowing it, even maybe without wanting it – manages to ‘forget’ the traditional purposes of the history of ‘literature’ (whose theoretical horizon *demands* that, one way or another, the unnatural marriage of the sonnet and the *feuilleton* be consummated) and considers it ‘enough’ to make a contribution, by studying a form or a group of related forms, to the history of society.

Moreover, not enough consideration is given to a most curious fact: the adamantine lack of interest that historians ‘proper’ have always displayed towards literary (and, more generally, artistic) historiography. Even the ‘total history’ of the *Annales* school has as it were stopped short on the edge of this field of studies, without ever managing to become significantly interested or involved in it. Now, if we rule out the possibility that historians hate literary critics for private and unmentionable reasons, as well as the possibility that the latter are so much more inept than other historians as to merit their utter contempt, this state of affairs can only be explained by suggesting that literary historians do not manage to be ‘real’ historians because they deal with an *imaginary* object. They call this object ‘literary history’, but it is traversed by such a jumble of internal contradictions, Ptolemaic epicycles, ad hoc explanations and downright eccentricities (Gibbon belongs to English literature but not Conan Doyle) that their discipline is rendered totally unusable by any historical research equipped with a modicum of scientific self-control.

So a history of literature able to rewrite itself as a sociology of symbolic forms, a history of cultural conventions, should perhaps finally find a role and a dignity in the context of a total history of society. As is always the case, this would solve some problems and create others, starting with that raised by expressions like ‘total history’ or ‘social history’: concepts too broad to regulate any given piece of research. It is impossible to deny that human society is a multifarious, complex, overdetermined whole; but the theoretical difficulty obviously lies in trying to establish the *hierarchy* of different historical factors. The solution to this problem is, in turn, broadly an historical, empirical one. In an essentially agrarian society, climatic changes will have a far greater importance than in a basically industrial one. If the majority of the population
is illiterate, the written culture will oscillate between playing a wholly negligible part and having an overwhelming and traumatic function (as the printing of the Bible demonstrated). If, on the other hand, everyone is able to read, the written culture is unlikely to turn up such extreme effects, but in compensation it will become the regular and intimate accompaniment to every daily activity.

As historical periods change, then, the weight of the various institutions, their function, their position in the social structure change too. When, therefore, the historian of literary forms begins to look for those extra-literary phenomena which will help him (whether he knows it or not) orient and control his research, the only rule he can set himself is to assess each instance carefully. A few examples will help here too to clarify what I mean, and I hope they will show that the criterion of ‘each instance’ is not meant to encourage arbitrariness, but to subject it to the only kind of control possible in this context.

Let us take the knowledge of state structures and politico-juridical thought. This will be very helpful – and theoretically ‘pertinent’ – for analysing tragic form in the age of absolutism, but it will be a lot less so for studying comic form in the same period. In the eighteenth century it will remain important for analysing the ‘satiric’ form of the novel, and yet be almost totally irrelevant for analysing the ‘realist’ novel. Or again, a study of sexual prohibitions and certain dream symbols deriving from them can provide many suggestions about the literature of terror and practically nothing about detective fiction of the same decade. Conversely, the emotional reactions to the second industrial revolution will be pertinent to the analysis of science fiction, rather less so to that of detective fiction, and quite insignificant for the literature of terror.

Rather than multiply the examples, it will be useful to point out that the ‘pertinence’ of a historical factor or event to literary analysis does not of itself imply any judgement about its importance in the overall mechanism of history. The Second World War – to take a strident example – does not seem to have much usefulness for literary periodization or interpretation: this does not, obviously, make it a secondary episode or one without enormous explanatory power in other areas. The different institutions of history have uneven rhythms of development, and in this respect the primary task of criticism is to outline the evolution of its own area of analysis, even if this leads it to move away from or contradict periodizations operating elsewhere. The reconstruction of a unified historiographical map is a subsequent, and typically interdisciplinary, problem. But it can be successfully tackled only if one possesses knowledge
corroborated against the specific criteria of each particular area.

A final point of specification, even if the scope of the argument makes it superfluous: an extra-literary phenomenon is never more or less important as a possible ‘object’ or ‘content’ of a text, but because of its impact on systems of evaluation and, therewith, on rhetorical strategies. The phenomenon of popularized science is not ‘part’ of detective fiction because the detective works ‘scientifically’ (which is true enough but banal). Rather, we can say (taking a greater risk) that ‘science’ enters crime fiction by way of a particular semiotic mechanism (the decipherment of clues) and a narrative function reserved for it alone (the final dénouement). If we analyse these two rhetorical choices further (and increase the risk of being wrong even further) we can say that the decipherment of clues presupposes that ‘science’ is identified with an organicist ideology based on the ‘common-sense’ notion that differences in status cannot be altered; that the ending of the detective novel sketches an image of temporality where ‘science’, instead of being an activity which solicits some sort of ‘progress’, plays a drastically stabilizing role, guaranteeing the immutability of the given social order, or at least reducing its changes to a minimum.

With these observations, as was inevitable, the strictly historiographical issue has become mingled with the question of validity, or better perhaps ‘testability’, of critical interpretations. Albeit summarily, we must now ask in what ways hermeneutics and historiography interact, and what their respective spheres of validity are.

3. For a ‘Falsifiable’ Criticism

In principle, the criteria for testing literary interpretations should be the same as those already in use in every other scientific discipline. One should in other words demand of an interpretation that it is coherent, univocal and complete. And the test will consist in comparing it with data which – in the text or texts that constitute its object – appear contradictory or inexplicable in the light of the hypothesis itself. Nothing new here, one might say; and indeed this is nothing other than the elementary formulation of that principle of falsification used by all the empirical sciences, including, with a few additional problems, the historico-social sciences. All, that is, except twentieth-century literary criticism, whose methodological framework has for a long time rested on concepts like ‘polysemy’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘openness’, ‘difference’, all of which stress the non-univocal semantic character of the literary text. If a text is by definition non-univocal, even self-contradictory, then none of its elements can ever ‘falsify’ an
interpretation. Because of the semantic peculiarities of the literary text, it is taken for
granted from the outset that interpretive hypotheses will be negated and this state of
affairs is accepted as unavoidable. But if the text has no falsificatory power, then any
interpretation becomes legitimate, or, more exactly, none will ever be illegitimate. The
rivalry between different hypotheses, the pathos of refutation, the passion for
discussion – the ideals that animate every scientific undertaking – lose all foundation,
appear superfluous and almost inconceivable. Interpretations tend to become mutually
‘incommensurable’, they do not appear to have any ‘problems’ in common. The claim
that one of them is superior to another sinks almost to the level of a judgement of
taste, whose empirical foundation is felt as an unseemly and prolix pedantry.

I have exaggerated, but not all that much. So long as it continues to revolve around
concepts such as ‘ambiguity’ and the like, criticism will always, inexorably, be pushed
into multiplying, rather than reducing, the obstacles every social science encounters
when it tries to give itself a testable foundation. And all for nothing! For Hecuba!, one
feels inclined to add. For the point is not whether the literary use of language is
particularly polysemic or not. It is. But this in no way makes it impossible to conduct
univocal and potentially complete – and thus refutable – analyses. It only means that
these analyses must approach the text not as if it were a vector pointing neatly in one
direction, but as if it were a light-source radiating in several directions or a field of
forces in relatively stable equilibrium. These are more complex objects than a simple
arrow, but an empirical and testable analysis of them is entirely possible, on condition
that one aims to analyse and describe them as structures. By this token, adding,
subtracting or transforming the meaning of each of their elements will no longer be
treated (as is normally the case these days) as an operation which is ‘always
legitimate’ because of the weak logical connections instituted by the literary structure
(which is therefore the promised land of all deconstructionist thinking). Rather, it will
be treated as a legitimate act only if it contributes towards improving the total
knowledge of the text, and thus towards strengthening these connections, those
‘prohibitions’ which, as an organized whole, it imposes on the interpreter.

The day criticism gives up the battle cry ‘it is possible to interpret this element in the
following way’, to replace it with the much more prosaic ‘the following interpretation is
impossible for such and such a reason’, it will have taken a huge step forward on the
road of methodological solidity. This does not in the least mean giving up
unpredictable or daring interpretations: as Popper observed, the value of a theory is in
direct proportion to its improbability. It merely means subjecting this improbability to
rigorous checks, since what is bizarre or outlandish is not always also true. *Pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius* is a good way of summing up the spirit of scientific research.

If it is both possible and necessary for critical interpretations to be falsifiable, it needs to be added that the fundamental area where they should be tested is their analysis of rhetorical mechanisms. The reason for this is simple: if one wants to initiate a history of rhetorical forms, the validity of a hypothesis can be measured only by comparing it with other interpretations of the same form. This seems obvious – but it may be asked at this point, what has happened to the unity of rhetorical analysis and socio-historical analysis which we took as our starting point? To return to the interpretation of detective fiction put forward earlier: a historian of mentalities, or science, might object that in Conan Doyle’s time the most widespread image of science was not at all the one we ‘deduced’ from the rhetorical structure of the Sherlock Holmes cycle. Is it possible for an objection of this kind to have no falsificatory value?

It is, because the objection contains both a portion of truth (which constitutes, as we shall see, a falsification of a rather peculiar kind) and a portion of error. To start with the latter, let us suppose that a demographer discovers that the birth rate, in a given place and period, assumes a configuration that contradicts what one would reasonably expect of the relationship between population increase and, say, the relations of production, climatic conditions, habits of sanitation and religious beliefs in that same time and place. Would a specialist in these other areas of history believe the demographer’s statistics to be *wrong* because they do not tally with the results of his own research (which – let us suppose – have been fully confirmed and are now considered correct beyond question)? Certainly not: he might have his doubts, be surprised, suspect a mistaken calculation, pretend the figures do not exist. But he can only really reject them when they have been replaced by a different arrangement of the data which improves on them in terms of the principles established by demographic history, and not by the history of landed property or religion. Now there is no reason why the same principle should not apply to the field of rhetoric. A given rhetorical configuration – however absurd it might seem in the light of other historical findings – can only be negated in the fullest sense by a better rhetorical configuration.

Two considerations arise here, which I will mention very briefly. It is of course entirely true to say that the language of demography is much more nearly univocal than that of literary criticism. But this is largely because criticism, for the reasons mentioned earlier has always taken its own empirical foundations lightly, and, instead of
struggling to set up a scientific community with common aims and clear rules, has tacitly preferred to legitimate a state of affairs where everyone is free to do as they like. The lexico-grammatical euphoria of the last few years is only the latest episode in a long and illustrious tradition of intellectual irresponsibility. Yet in principle this sort of thing can always be remedied. The second consideration opens up a slightly different area. If criticism can give itself a reasonably testable foundation, then rhetorical analysis will necessarily acquire a different status within the ‘stronger’ social sciences. If a literary critic were to attend an interdisciplinary conference on totalitarianism and speak for an hour about, say, the mechanisms of allegory, the performance would seem strange and entertaining. And yet it is the only valid contribution our imaginary participant could offer. I believe it is time to put an end to the embarrassing pantomime where the literary historian is in fact the person who expounds the commonplaces everybody knows in a string of well-turned and persuasive sentences. Historians know how to use computers; they will have no difficulty learning the difference between metaphor and metonymy – assuming, naturally, that one is able to demonstrate that the choice between these two figures entails cultural differences of some significance.

We now come to the portion of truth contained in the objection set out above. I feel slightly uneasy here, because I know that more than once I myself have been guilty of the error I am about to describe, which is this. A satisfactory level of rhetorical analysis is reached. The configuration obtained seems to refer unambiguously to a particular hierarchy of values. So one performs the conclusive welding-together of rhetoric and social history. Let us suppose that up till now the argument has been flawless. It is precisely at this point that one makes a mistake. One succumbs to the allure of the sweeping generalization and falls into what we could call the ‘Zeitgeist fallacy’. Does the rhetoric of detective fiction imply a certain attitude towards science? Right then: ‘the society Conan Doyle’s time’, ‘England in the eighteen nineties’, ‘the imperialist phase of capitalism’ – whatever else one cares to invoke – all ‘share that attitude’. In relation to this turn in the argument, the objections of the historian of mentalities obviously have falsificatory value. But only in relation to this. What becomes arbitrary when it is generalized may perfectly well not be so if it aims for a more restricted sphere of validity.

This universalizing immodesty, which follows literary historiography about like a shadow, has a secret cause which it is helpful to know because it points by contrast to a possible way out. The cause is named Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Few things
have been so exhilarating for aesthetic studies – and so fatal to their empirical solidity – as Hegel’s marriage of philosophy of history with idealist aesthetics. In the *Aesthetics*, every historical epoch has in essence one ideal content to ‘express’, and it gives ‘sensible manifestation’ to it through one artistic form. It was practically inevitable that – following the argument in reverse – once one had defined a rhetorical form one felt authorized to link it directly to the idea – single, solitary, resplendent – in which a whole epoch is supposedly summed up. Inevitable, and wrong – or at least, nearly always. Although from time to time moments of extraordinary intellectual and formal compactness occur, as a rule the opposite happens in history, and no system of values has ever been able to represent a *Zeitgeist* without being challenged by rival systems. Besides, if it were otherwise the whole of the present argument, from the openings lines onwards, would be totally absurd, because rhetoric should not even exist. Remember Kenneth Burke: the aim of rhetoric – promoting adherence to specific values – presupposes its opposite – division. All rhetorical forms aspire to become the ‘Spirit of the Age’, but their very plurality shows us that this term indicates an aspiration rather than a reality, and should therefore be employed as a highly useful conceptual tool – but not as a fact.

Conversely, it is precisely a respect for the specificity of each individual form that seems to offer the best guarantee of restraint in the historico-social links that criticism seeks to establish. The more one manages to differentiate a given form from ‘rival’ forms, the more social and ideological connections one will find are prohibited. The advantages of this both for historical concreteness and empirical testability are obvious. This brings us back to the situation outlined in the previous section. If the history of literature ever transforms itself into a history of rhetorical forms, the latter will in turn have to start from the realization that a form becomes more comprehensible and more interesting the more one grasps the conflict, or at least the difference, connecting it to the forms around it. And this should not be understood – as has in fact already started to happen – as a diachronic criterion: or at least not only, and not primarily. As well as grasping the succession of different and mutually hostile forms, literary history must aim at a synchronic periodization which is no longer ‘summed up’ in individual exemplary forms, but is set up for each period, through a kind of parallelogram of rhetorical forces, with its dominant, its imbalances, its conflicts and its division of tasks.

At this point the relations between the history of forms and the history of society will perhaps lose their uncertain and episodic character, and that same heterogeneity of
extra-literary references that has characterized (until now in a casual and untestable way) the activity of interpretation will appear as a necessary path to follow. The disparate and discontinuous nature of those references does not (necessarily) depend on the instability of the categories used by criticism, but on its search for concreteness. It has to draw on those aspects of social life which enable one to explain that specific material object that is the text under analysis. Heterogeneity of connections is in the nature of this work because it is in the nature of literature itself. Literature is perhaps the most omnivorous of social institutions, the most ductile in satisfying disparate social demands, the most ambitious in not recognizing limits to its own sphere of representation. One cannot ask that heterogeneity to disappear, but only (and it is no small request) to reflect faithfully the real diversity, in terms of their destination and function, of the texts under examination.

4. Literature, ‘Consent’

This historical project lies almost entirely in the future. Who knows whether it will ever be carried out? Who knows whether it is a reasonable project and not just a little personal utopia (which, moreover, I am still a long way from having begun to put into practice)? Whatever the case, it is idle to speculate too much on the best of all possible criticisms. Let us try instead to complete the argument by going back to a number of characteristics of what we call ‘literature’ which justify that project. We need in other words to isolate those elements of that ‘real object’, literature, which suggest that it becomes an ‘object of knowledge’ according to the criteria outlined so far.

Picking up the points raised in the first section, let us say that the substantial function of literature is to secure consent. To make individuals feel ‘at ease’ in the world they happen to live in, to reconcile them in a pleasant and imperceptible way to its prevailing cultural norms. This is the basic hypothesis. To corroborate it, however, it will be necessary to try it out on the one hand with a literary phenomenon – tragedy – that seems to indicate the exact opposite, and on the other with the number of particularly significant articulations of modern aesthetic and critical thought.

In one of the essays that follow I have tried to show that Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy contributed, more radically than any other cultural phenomenon of the same period, to discrediting the values of absolute monarchy, thereby paving the way, with
wholly destructive means, for the English revolution of the seventeenth century. What I have just claimed about literature as consent and conciliation seems to be completely negated. And in fact it is, because that hypothesis was proposed in a historically indeterminate form, whereas its validity should be restricted to western capitalist society. This society is separated from the age of tragedy - the age of absolutism - by a historical rupture that radically altered two decisive aspects of literary, and more generally artistic, activity. First, tragedy belongs to a world that does not yet recognize the inevitability of permanent conflict between opposing and immitigable interests or values, and therefore does not feel any need to confront the problem of reconciling them. And second - there is, as we shall see, a link between the two - the age in which tragedy flourished did not recognize aesthetic activity as having any autonomy, but believed it should always cooperate directly, immediately, in moral or cognitive purposes.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tragedy thus belongs to a world which the dominant ideology still wants to present as an organism, where between the various social classes there is a functional difference but not a conflict of interests. It is a world that still thinks of itself as an organic whole, but is ceasing - clamorously - to be so. Tragedy springs from this unrepeatable historical conjuncture. Its elementary structure always consists in showing how two values that should be in a relationship of dominance and subordination suddenly, mysteriously (the mystery of Iago, of the witches in Macbeth, of passion in Phèdre) become autonomous and take on equal violence. As all Shakespeare’s and Racine’s tragic heroes discover to their consternation, the traditional ‘sovereignty’ of reason, or morality, over the other human faculties suddenly and irreversibly becomes impossible.

It is a situation we can understand only if we are able to tear ourselves away from the presuppositions of our own culture. Its ‘tragic’ quality does not lie (as would now be the case for us) in the fact that the story eventually leads to the sacrifice of one of the two values in conflict, so that the surviving value too is darkened by the shadow of mourning. This does happen, of course, yet it is not here, in the ‘ending’, that the tragedy shows itself for what it is, but in its presuppositions: in the fact that it has been possible to imagine, and put into words, an irreconcilable conflict. This preliminary rhetorical choice - this basic situation, which the tragic dramatist never bothers to ‘motivate’, but only expound with the utmost clarity - breaks organicist unity forever, and is felt as something painful, incomprehensible, ‘tragic’, precisely because organicism is still felt to be the only possible form of thought.
We can invert the formula used above, and say that tragedy presents a world which is ceasing to be organic, but which is still only able to think of itself as organic. It is the paradoxical spirit of this literary form, which always leaves us, as Goethe observed, ‘with troubled minds’, ill at ease, uncertain. It was for this reason an unrivalled instrument of criticism and dissent. But an unrepeatable one: once the organicist ideology disappeared, so did the formal possibility of its tragic negation.

Tragedy as an unrepeatable ‘exception’ in the history of literary forms: for the purposes of our argument this would be enough in itself, but there is more. Modern literature and aesthetics are born not only ‘after’ tragedy but also ‘against’ it. A metamorphosis takes place which goes beyond the realm of aesthetics and extends right across the bourgeois cultural system. Precisely because this system sees conflict as a given fact of existence in society, it no longer sets itself the task of depicting it with ‘pity and terror’ but of showing that mutually opposing values and interests can always reach, if not a genuine conciliation, at least some kind of coexistence and compromise. In the realm of aesthetics this anti-tragic impulse of our culture appears with particular clarity. Indeed, it appears as the real foundation, the secret raison d’être of the aesthetic sphere itself. This is attested by two works which have contributed like few others to the formation of modern aesthetic thought: the *Critique of Judgement* and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

It is obviously impossible for me to discuss these two works here with the detail and care they deserve. But a few rapid references will at least serve to indicate how they are central to the path we are following. To begin with the *Critique of Judgement*, the first point to stress is that Kant wrote it, as the title of paragraph III of the introduction tells us, “as a means of connecting the two parts of philosophy in a whole”. These two parts, analysed in the previous *Critiques*, had in other words been unable to produce a systematic, harmonious whole: “Concepts of nature contain the ground of all theoretical cognition *a priori* and rest, as we saw, upon the legislative authority of understanding. The concept of freedom contains the ground of all sensuously unconditioned practical precepts *a priori*, and rests upon that of reason. Both faculties [...] have [...] their own peculiar jurisdiction in the matter of their content, and so, there being no further (*a priori*) jurisdiction above them, the division of Philosophy into theoretical and practical is justified”22.

Kant’s purpose is to heal the laceration resulting from the ‘disillusionment’ created by the natural sciences, from which the separation between judgements of fact and value
judgements stemmed. While this separation safeguards the autonomy of scientific inquiry and is thus welcomed – in that sphere – as a liberating innovation, it reverberates as a painful mutilation in the sphere where moral values and world views are generated. As Kant himself observes in paragraph IX of the introduction, the “concept of a finality of nature”, which is the presupposition of judgement, must be postulated because only in this way can ‘freedom’ become an operative and effective faculty, its “final end […] actualized in nature and in harmony with its laws”. Kant continues: “The effect in accordance with the concept of freedom is the final end which (or the manifestation of which in the sensible world) is to exist, and this presupposes the condition of the possibility of that end in nature (i.e. in the nature of the subject as a being of the sensible world, namely as man). It is so presupposed a priori, and without regard to the practical, by judgement. This faculty, with its concept of a finality of nature, provides us with the mediating concept between concepts of nature and the concept of freedom [...]”23.

Kant’s research reveals all its historical ‘necessity’ if one reflects that while capitalist society is unthinkable without the scientific and technical progress reflected in the separation of intellect and morality, it is equally unthinkable without the incessant attempt to annul that separation and remedy it, an attempt to which the extraordinary and apparently inexplicable proliferation of aesthetic activities that distinguishes capitalism bears witness. In our society the socialization of the individual no longer possesses the legitimacy once conferred upon it by the bonds of tradition. It appears equitable only if it satisfies – as Hegel observed in the Philosophy of Right – “the right of individuals to their particular satisfaction”. And no ‘satisfaction’ is possible, for that symbolic animal, man, if existence is split between a sphere where cultural values are everything and a sphere where they have no legitimacy at all. The more the ‘legislation of the intellect’ increased, and the more numerous were the aspects of social life which appeared to be sustained by a rigorous symbolic ‘neutrality’ – the objective, alien ‘second nature’ typically summed up by nineteenth-century economic mechanisms – the more developed had to become the aesthetic effort to present the world as something ‘finalistic’, as a world-for-the-individual.

Hence the cultural centrality of Kant’s attempt to establish the ‘middle term’ capable of reconnecting nature and reason. Hence his insistence on the ‘easing and intensification of life’ produced by the contemplation of the beautiful, and on the ‘harmony’ that aesthetic pleasure arouses both within the individual and in the relation between the individual and nature. Hence, finally, all the reflections on the ‘beautiful in
nature’ – a problem that later aesthetic theory would consider improper but whose massive, central presence in the *Critique of Judgement* does not, I think, stem only from the peculiarities of eighteenth-century aesthetics but at least as much from Kant’s awareness that the divergence between the natural sciences and practical-rhetorical culture had to find a necessary and at the same time uncertain mediation, an ‘as if’ of which the concept of the ‘beautiful in nature’, in many respects a precarious one, was to be the first version.

It is well known that the letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* are largely limited to restating the substance of the *Critique of Judgement* while simplifying it. The novelty of Schiller’s work lies in extracting from Kant’s arguments what we might call ‘cultural politics’ (not always, it should be added, entirely in line with the intentions of the *Critique*). Thus, in the ninth letter, art is expressly presented (something which never happened in Kant’s text) as an unparallelled instrument of consent: unparallelled because – the observation takes us back to the problems posed at the start of this essay – it is able to act unobserved, eluding the conscious control of its user: “The seriousness of your principles will frighten them [your contemporaries] away, but in the play of your semblance they will be prepared to tolerate them; for their taste is purer than their heart, and it is here that you must lay hold of the timorous fugitive. In vain will you assail their precepts, in vain condemn their practice; but on their leisure hours you can try your shaping hand. Banish from their pleasures caprice, frivolity and coarseness, and imperceptibly you will banish these from their actions and, eventually, from their inclinations too. Surround them, wherever you meet them, with the great and noble forms of genius, and encompass them about with the symbols of perfection, until Semblance conquer Reality, and Art triumph over Nature”

In other places – and above all in the most famous section of the work, the sixth letter – Schiller develops Kant’s theme of art as the only activity allowing man’s life to regain its lost harmony: “That polypoid character of the Greek States, in which every individual enjoyed an independent existence but could, when need arose, grow into the whole organism, now made way for an ingenious clockwork, in which, out of the piecing together of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. [...] Thus little by little the concrete life of the Individual is destroyed in order that the abstract idea of the Whole may drag out its sorry existence, and the State remains forever a
stranger to its citizens since at no point does it ever make contact with their feeling. [...] One-sidedness in the exercise of his powers must, it is true, inevitably lead the individual into error; but the species as a whole to truth. [...] Athletic bodies can, it is true, be developed by gymnastic exercises; beauty only through the free and harmonious play of the limbs. In the same way the keying up of individual functions of the mind can indeed produce extraordinary human beings; but only the equal tempering of them all, happy and complete human beings”

These passages help clarify the aims and the limitations of Schiller’s ‘harmony’. The split suffered by each individual – the Aesthetic Education leaves no doubt on this – is a consequence of a social split (between church and state, nature and reason, ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’). But the reconciliation effected by art, the harmony it represents and promotes, is never seriously presented as a model to be offered to society as a whole – as an ideal that would enable the split to be healed – but only as the best way of facing up to the split and coexisting with it. The criterion of harmony is entirely confined to the sphere of symbolic legitimation, which, in fact, it institutes as an autonomous sphere. Although the material causes of the split are considered inhuman and dangerous, Schiller’s harmony can exist and have a value only to the extent that they too continue to exist. The point is not to eliminate the conflicting tensions but to create a sphere that can temper them, reorganizing the perception of the split itself in such a way as to make those who must endure it ‘happy’. This ‘happiness’ is the essence of modern ‘consent’: and since it is increasingly hard to attain in everyday life, a ‘form’ becomes necessary which can in some way guarantee its existence.

One last point, which will enable us to move on from Schiller. The laceration Kant aimed to heal with his third Critique had been between intellect and reason, nature and freedom. In other words it separated a realm where the concept of value was everything from an opposite realm where it was nothing. With Schiller this framework is modified. In the Aesthetic Education the term ‘nature’ no longer indicates a symbolically neutral world but a particular set of values. ‘Nature’ is no longer opposed to ‘reason’ because it lacks attributes of value, but because it is fed by different values. If this is true, then the aesthetic sphere fulfils two distinct cultural functions in bourgeois civilization, and Schiller’s Aesthetic Education is situated at their meeting point. The first function is that indicated by Kant’s aesthetics: to restore the connection between the world of judgements of fact and that of judgements of value by resisting scientific ‘disillusionment’ and instead satisfying that deep-seated need for
'magic', which is part and parcel of the desire to see values ‘rooted in facts’, thus avoiding responsibility for their partiality in the secure belief that they ‘stem’ from the very ‘reality of things’

The second function has been superimposed on this and in the course of time has probably acquired even greater importance. It consists in leading to a reconciliation between conflicting values. Schiller’s work is only half a step in this direction. The values to be harmonized in the Aesthetic Education are not conflictual in and of themselves. They become so only because of their one-sided development. But they can still be ‘tempered’, and in this way led back to the neo-classical concept of ‘harmony’. In the picture I have in mind this is not possible anymore, because the conflict no longer stems from the fact that elements once joined have become reciprocally extraneous while remaining amenable to a new synthesis, but from a real opposition, an intrinsic hostility that no longer holds out any opportunities of ‘dialectical’ resolution.

For this to happen, however, bourgeois society had to open up definitively, and painfully, to social conflict: the incessant and bloody conflict that runs through European history from 1789 to the present, dividing every ‘people’, every national culture, not so much from a ‘foreign’ enemy any more as from an ‘internal’ enemy, one that speaks the same language, lives in the same towns and often calls upon the same god. The origin of conflicts could no longer be attributed to longstanding historical or geographical differences, ‘national’ characters that had come to be felt as almost immutable facts of nature. No: the conflict was nearer now, and therefore more acute – and, so it seemed, unresolvable.

Nineteenth-century literature is pervaded by this new perception of the conflictual nature of society. Indeed it seems that its great historical legacy consists in indicating how – in a civilization irreparably divided between hostile interests and values – the concept of ‘consent’ itself has to undergo a profound transformation. It can no longer consist in the drastic and acknowledged triumph of one system of values over all the others. It must assume a more ductile and precarious form: no longer that of full dialectical synthesis but the more ‘dubious’ one of compromise.

Compromise is the great theme of ‘realist’ narrative fiction and perhaps, even more significantly, the main rhetorical criterion of that still more enigmatic phenomenon, the ‘modern lyric’. If one had to characterize the latter in one word, the term that would
spring to mind is ‘obscurity’. And this obscurity – which to become such is willing to risk unintelligibility – is due largely to the constraining and ineluctable attempt to make semantic ‘compromises’ between what have become totally heterogeneous and contradictory elements. Baudelaire’s oxymoron is still the figure that best exemplifies and sums up this operation. Paul Ricoeur has written: “[...] as a man of desires I go forth in disguise – larvatus prodeo. By the same token language itself is from the outset and for the most part distorted: it means something other than what it says, it has a double meaning, it is equivocal. The dream and its analogues are thus set within a region of language that presents itself as the locus of complex significations where another meaning is both given and hidden in an immediate meaning. Let us call this region of double meaning ‘symbol’ [...]”28.

Ricoeur’s words introduce the last turn to be taken here. They do not refer to the modern lyric and literary hermeneutics but to the dream and psychoanalysis. And indeed, if one wants to see in literature the cultural activity delegated to secure consent by effecting ‘adjustments’ between conflicting values, one cannot dispense with at least a summary discussion of certain aspects of Freudian thinking.

Freud, as is well known, saw in art the most successful form of ‘compensation’ for those impulses which civilization compels the individual to sacrifice30. This Freudian view contains a number of elements which are absolutely essential to interpretative activity: the image of the text as a field of conflict between psychical and cultural forces; the idea that these forces are differently placed in relation to our self-awareness (that is, they are more or less ‘unconscious’); the insistence that the conflict between them can be understood only if its specific rhetorical formalizations are analysed; the explanation of the surprising and often, indeed, ‘obscure’ quality of these formalizations, which is traced back to the heterogeneous and mutually hostile nature of the forces reaching a compromise within them.

These are all, in my opinion, permanent contributions to the theory of literary interpretation. The problem lies elsewhere. It consists in asking whether the theoretical horizon of psychoanalysis, having produced those contributions, does not in the end prevent them from being used in the more testable and productive way. Let me explain, starting with an essential concept for the theory of the ‘formal return of the repressed’: the concept of ‘negation’ (Verneigung). In his Freudian reading of Phèdre, Francesco Orlando has elaborated and condensed this concept into the formula ‘I do not like it’. The formula expresses a conflict: ‘(I) do not/like it’. But this
conflict is expressed and interpreted in a scientifically unacceptable way, because only one of its elements is defined: the other is determined, precisely, ‘by negation’ only. That side of the opposition where the repressed is located possesses a content of its own – the ‘like it’, which refers to a specific object or image. The other side, by contrast, is nothing more than a ‘do not’. This shows that it is considered of entirely secondary importance to determine it for what it is. It can be described and possesses theoretical relevance only by virtue of what it is not: “If a desire of a certain kind or intensity can be expressed through negation by the declaration I DO NOT LIKE IT, an even more unavowable or greater desire will give rise, for example, to I DO NOT LIKE IT AT ALL. A still more unavowable or greater desire might be rendered as I HATE IT, I DETEST IT, or other, similar expressions that remain clear negations though incorporated into a verb without a negative participle. We could compare this to a container whose contents exert a more or less explosive pressure on its walls; the greater the pressure, the more resistant or numerous the walls must be”

The opening sentence of Eros and Civilization comes to mind here: “The methodical sacrifice of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially useful activities, is culture”. Culture is ‘nothing else’ than the repression of instincts. It can take whatever form it likes. The only thing that counts is that it fulfil that function. Hence, evidently, the historically indeterminate anthropology that has always vitiated the psychoanalytic enterprise. But hence also an unforeseen consequence at the strictly hermeneutic level. What had been presented as a conflict between opposing forces is actually transformed – following the ‘negation’ hypothesis – into a single-sided process, much closer to the typical ‘overturnings’ of Hegelian dialectic (the term ‘negation’ should in any case have put us on our guard) than to the materialist view of a clash ween specific entities.

In the presence of the ‘negation’, only one thing deserves attention: what becomes of the emergent desire, how it is modified and transformed. As for the metamorphoses of the other pole of the pair, there is nothing to say, despite the fact that they should be of some interest to cultural historians. Yet it is inevitable it should be like this, because that other pole never really existed, being just the ‘alienated’ figure of the repressed. And so the a priori lack of interest in the ‘repressive’ side of the pair (in ‘civilization’, in ‘history’) ends up by devaluing the intuition of the text as a ‘compromise’, diluting it into that far more jaded idea of the text as a place where an ‘essence’ is more or less fully ‘expressed’. The simile of the ‘container’ whose ‘form’ (the ‘walls’) is altered by the ‘pressure of content’ leaves no room for doubt on the matter.
This is a relapse into a monistic conception of artistic phenomena, one that is in any case detectable in the concept of ‘return of the repressed’ itself. If literary texts – and on this score I personally have no doubts at all – owe a large part of their enigmatic attraction to the fact that they repropose unconscious psychical contents, there is no reason, either theoretical or empirical, why one would restrict the realm of the ‘unconscious’ just to the ‘repressed’. Freud himself suggested, with particular clarity in The Ego and the Id, that the unconscious includes, as well as repressed contents properly speaking, the level of the super-ego. If, therefore, literature has the task of ‘familiarizing’ us with our unconscious selves, reviving those connections of which we normally remain unaware, there is no reason at all why this operation should not involve the super-ego too. So much the more if one remembers that the super-ego – the moral conscience in its ‘cruel’, inexorable form – does not at all coincide, either in Freud or in fact, with the so-called ‘reality principle’. When one says, correctly, that bourgeois civilization lives on a tacit but rigid separation between what is right ‘in theory’ and what applies ‘in practice’ – between maximum principles and their minimum realization – one is saying (in Freudian terms) precisely that the relationship between super-ego and reality principle (between moral conscience and actual social behaviour) is by its nature problematic. ‘Civilization’ produces the super-ego, and makes it its ‘emissary’ in the individual psyche. But then it lets it down, turns it away, discourages it (and if necessary fights it: in war, whoever abides too rigorously by the Ten Commandments is shot). Consequently, the super-ego also needs continually to ‘re-emerge’ in works which variously redefine its sphere of application, and show with what other psychical and social forces it comes into conflict. Much of the realist fiction of the past century indeed revolves around this problem; and ‘moving’ literature for children, which is one of the final and exemplary products of this tradition, fully bears out this hypothesis.

The theory of the ‘return of the repressed’ therefore needs extension, first of all. But it also needs correction. For it suggests that aesthetic pleasure consists essentially in the perception of this ‘return’. The formal ‘compromise’, according to this argument, is merely the necessary means for making the repressed contents re-emerge. In Orlando’s words, “I would say that the figure is the perpetual tribute paid – and how willingly it is paid – by the language of the conscious ego to the unconscious”.

A statement like this necessarily rests on the assumption that the greatest happiness we could find would be to express and live the unconscious contents of the psyche fully and without restraint. Since this is not possible, one ‘compensates’ with the compromise offered by art. But one makes it known that it would be nice to do without
This hypothesis seems to me untenable. Every so often, in fact, the contents of our unconscious do in fact emerge in a radical and consequential way. And, in these cases, the result is the exact opposite of pleasure. The individual finds himself radically alone, dragged into an indomitable and unequal conflict with the surrounding world. More exactly, one could say that both the id and the super-ego, although in different ways, ceaselessly push the individual towards this conflict. They drag him, in their intransigent one-sidedness, towards an irreparable unhappiness.

But in that case, aesthetic ‘pleasure’ cannot consist in the perception of a ‘return’ of the unconscious, but rather in its exact opposite: in the contemplation of a successful compromise. The ‘formal’ conciliation is not the means, the simple medium of pleasure: it is its end, its true and only substance. The pleasure does not lie in having ‘slackened’ the grip of censorship a little but in having redrawn with precision the spheres of influence of the various psychic forces. This enables one to ‘tic down’ their restlessness, at least for the time being, and grants the individual that ‘reduction of tension’ which, according to Freud, characterizes all forms of pleasure.

If we turn our attention to the ‘formal compromise’ effected by the text, we will also be able – in conclusion – to bring back into the limelight an element of Freudian theory which literary criticism has always left in the wings: the so-called ‘reality principle’. The meaning of this concept is already uncertain and unstable in Freud himself. It is sometimes presented as the opponent of the ‘pleasure principle’, at other times as its ‘extension’. In some cases it seems to coincide with the ‘exact knowledge of reality’, whereas in others its cognitive character seems entirely secondary. At times it is placed in strict connection with the moral conscience, at times in conflict with it. Yet there is no doubt that Freud wanted to indicate by this term an aspect of the psychic apparatus and of social behaviour whose importance is beyond question. The ‘reality principle’ is what allows one to live in a divided and conflictual world, rounding off its sharp edges and managing simultaneously to satisfy imperatives of different natures and strengths.

Such is the meaning of a famous passage where Freud describes the behaviour of the ego, the part of the psyche most closely connected to the reality principle: “[...] we see this same ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from
the severity of the super-ego. [...] In its position midway between the id and reality, it only too often yields to the temptation to become sycophantic, opportunist and lying, like a politician who sees the truth, but wants to keep his place in popular favour". Like the ego, the reality principle does not, therefore, indicate an autonomous ‘principle’, and a self-sufficient world of objects, but that sort of ‘middle-term’ which always emerges from the conclusion of a conflict. It is the line of least resistance round which an equilibrium is built, a sense of the individual’s wholeness and involvement in the world. This is a precarious equilibrium, sure enough, recognized as such (when it is recognized) only after it has been attained, without (we should say) one’s being clearly conscious of it.

Yet the equilibrium is attained. To break it down into its strictly unconscious components is a necessary stage of analysis. But it must be followed by the recognition that once the ‘compromise’ between them has been effected, we find ourselves looking at a new content, which is not reducible to the sum of its parts. This content is ‘implicit’, not ‘unconscious’. There is in fact no longer any need for consciousness to repress and distance it, since it does not violate the reigning social norms, but rather conforms to them, coincides with them. Indeed, in a sense it helps to form them because this new content is none other than doxa, opinion, the commonplace, the ‘world view’ as it generally appears in its concrete form: not as a ‘pure’ and thorny system but as something persuasive, seductive, all-embracing, as something that guarantees a modus vivendi, an adjustment between conflicting thrusts.

From the reality principle to the doxa, and thence to literature, which is – however paradoxical it may seem – one of the clearest manifestations of the reality principle. Literature is the ‘middle term’ par excellence, and its ‘educational’, ‘realistic’ function consists precisely in training us without our being aware of it for an unending task of mediation and conciliation. Literature (which, like the reality principle and the doxa, prospers in periods of social stability and suddenly appears ‘useless’ or ‘impossible’ during wars and revolutions) indicates how deeply rooted is our desire to make the ‘adjustment’ to the existing order coincide with some idea of ‘happiness’. It makes us realize that ‘consent’ – feeling that we ‘want’ to do what we ‘have’ to do – can be one of the highest aspirations of the individual psyche. It tells us, in other words, that in the absence of great battles (and therefore – the point cannot be suppressed – in the absence of what could be great tragedies) it is inevitable that from time to time one will try to convince oneself that this is really the best of all possible worlds.
If so undeconstructive and unliberating a notion of literature still seems disagreeable, or unconvincing, I can only draw on an image that has often come back to me in the course of this study. It is a bas-relief of an ancient Greek tomb in the British Museum. It shows a harpy – the upper half of its body a woman, the lower a bird of prey – carrying off a small human body: according to the experts, the soul of the deceased. Below, the harpy is clutching the soul tight in its claws, but higher up her Greek arms are holding her in an attentive and tender embrace. The soul is doing nothing to get out of the harpy’s clutch. It seems calm, relaxed even. It probably does not like being dead: if it did there would be no need for harpies. But at the same time the soul must know that there is no escape from the grip of the claws. For this reason it does not lower its gaze, but rests its head trustingly on the harpy’s arms. Precisely because there is no escape it prefers to delude itself about the affectionate, almost maternal nature of the creature dragging it away with her in flight.

Can we blame it?