

POETIC LANGUAGE

AND SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE

It was a tenacious dream: the first language spoken by man was music, poetry and science, all at the same time. In the beginning the same word, given by God or dictated by Nature, stood for things, feelings and laws. And in the cherished image of this dawning faculty not only had the distinction between word and song, the difference between expressive power and objective designational power (or "referential function," as the linguists say) not yet appeared, but the sacred and profane uses of speech had not yet established their separate kingdoms: in the great festival of the earliest days each word was a celebrant and contained the substance of reality. The word, invested with an integral meaning, hit the mark and rejoiced at the contact. Everything to which man gave a name was a god to him or the delegate of a god, so that by virtue of a benevolent revelation or of an exact inspiration the earliest vocal expression combined the fullness of *knowing* with the musical fullness of its expressive power. But this language of Paradise, witness to an age when man was not separated from man or removed from Nature or from God, has long been forgotten, dismembered,

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

dispersed. Multiple and incompatible idioms have taken its place. The clear light of meaning has become clouded.

This fable of a privileged primitive state could only have been conceived by men who were dedicated to a sort of linguistic weakness, to whom the field of language appeared as a field of infinite separations: separation between music and word, split between elevated language and quotidian speech, between poetic myth and laborious reasoning. To belong to a world in which words imperfectly define what they are supposed to, in which people do not understand each other from one region to another, in which Nature refuses to be translated into human speech—all these inadequacies oblige man to think of his misfortune as an accident, merited or unmerited, which happened at a fatal moment in his history. Thus he reconstructs, in retrospect, an imaginary time when the present insufficiency did not exist; an epoch when unity prevailed, when communication was so perfect that animals themselves could speak. And it was necessary to invent a catastrophe—the Flood or the Tower of Babel—to account for the splitting up which left of the “absolute” language only scattered vestiges, flecks of gold in the clay.

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This nostalgia for lost linguistic powers has been widespread in divers periods, but I am convinced that it was intensified in the 18th century; that it put on flesh in numerous theoretical works; that it was grounds for many a long debate. A Golden Age of Language is imagined in the past, at varying distances, but always beyond our reach—irrecoverable. According to some, who tend toward orthodoxy, it is primitive Hebrew, the universal mother-tongue: “The words which compose this language are as many natural signs, in which the necessary liaison with things may be found.”¹ For others, it is more generally the primitive languages of the South, singing, passionate and metaphoric (Rousseau). For yet others, who are closely associated

¹ Frain du Tremblay, who formulated this hypothesis, soon rejected it. Cf. *Traité des Langues*, Paris, 1703, p. 46.

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with freemasonry, it is the language of the Atlantes, a people of the great Asiatic North, possessors of an exact cosmological wisdom of which Greek myths and Egyptian hieroglyphics are only fragmentary derivations, cloudy and degraded. According to the pleasure of the author it is at times scientific qualities, at times poetic qualities which appear as the fundamental privilege of this first language and which elicit praise and regret. The most daring are not far from believing that the "universal characteristic" of which the scholars dream existed in those far-off days and was then betrayed. As for those who, more prudently, are content to attribute a very high degree of emotional and poetic energy to the original tongue, they nonetheless lament that the rest of history has been a disaster, a degradation. Finally, others, who prefer not to adventure into conjectures on origins, are convinced of the existence—in the Ancients, in the Greek cities and in the Roman Republic—of a perfection of eloquence, an oratorical mastery of minds and hearts whose secret is lost to modern societies, because eloquence, to make full use of its powers, presupposes liberty, freedom of assembly and leisure to attend public debates. The common characteristic of all these visions of the past is communion, unity, efficient use of words, which overcome all separations and enable man to live happily in a faultless universe.

Why did this intensification of the myth of a primitive language occur at this precise moment? I see the reason in the rise and success of the exact sciences: mathematics, geometry, physics, mechanics, astronomy. They were confirmed and developed as perfect languages and were not long in giving positive proof of their power.

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Scholars and philosophers, especially in the 18th century, assuredly did not neglect to claim that the "language of calculation" and that of logical analysis were not only the most appropriate instruments for knowledge, but that they were also the true poetic method, and even more, that they were closer to primitive languages than the ones in current use. Thus some, from Paracelsus to the Romantics and even to our day,

hoped to find in imaginative intuition the trait common to poetic genius and to scientific genius. Condillac assures us that imagination does not explain anything:

To invent, they say, is to find something new by the power of one's imagination. This is a very poor definition [...] Because we believe we show a great power of imagination when we explain badly the simplest discoveries, we conclude that a powerful imagination was required to make these discoveries.

We assume that this supposed power is the property of men of genius, and for that reason we want to be thought of as having powerful imaginations. A geometer will tell you that Newton must have had as much imagination as Corneille, since he had as much genius; he does not see that Corneille was a genius only because he could analyze as well as Newton. Analysis creates poets as it makes mathematicians, and although it forces them to speak in different languages, it is still the same method. Indeed, once the subject of a drama is decided on, finding the plot, the characters and their words are so many problems to be solved, and all problems are solved by analysis.

Consequently, genius is not so mysterious. It is only a "simple intelligence which finds something that no one else had been able to find before [...] It begins at the beginning and goes forward. Therein lies all its art..." To *analyze* as Condillac would have it, true analogies must be followed. We would be helped by the vernaculars if they were governed by analogy. Unfortunately, they have lost this characteristic:

A language would be of the greatest facility if analogy, which alone had constructed it, were always and inescapably capable of being understood. Then we could reason as Nature teaches us to reason, and we could go from one discovery to another.

None of the known vernaculars has this advantage, because they are in many respects only the debris of many languages which are no longer spoken [...]

Primitive languages, however limited, were better constructed than ours, and they had the advantage of showing the beginning and generation of acquired knowledge. They thus opened the way for

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invention. Inventive peoples, reflecting on their languages, saw through analogy how they had been taught, and how they could still learn. But where and when did these peoples exist?²

Whatever may have been the hope of finding in analysis (Stendhal dreamed of it, in his youth) the common method applicable to both literary creation and scientific invention, there nonetheless exists an irreducible difference between “vernacular,” degenerate and dismembered, and that “well-constructed language” which should be, according to Condillac, true science. Now, the ends of poetry are not to correct the vernacular but to be resigned to the inevitable and make the best of it. History shows that the principles stated by Condillac have favored the development of science but not of art. It could be demonstrated as well that the *Naturphilosophie* of German Romanticism, the magical speculations of Novalis, are translated into poetry, while their scientific “rendering” has been nil: this theory, a reverse image of that of Condillac, seeking a common drive for poetry and science in intuitive imagination, has thus had no better success.

We must therefore accept the fact that there are two *separate* languages: we are free to experience the nostalgia for a state of non-separation prior to the appearance of modern science, or we are free to try to discern in the far-off ends which science and art seek in their separate ways—a point of convergence at which they will reunite, that is, *meaning*. This is what Kant attempts in his *Critique of Judgment*.³

I would like to recall just briefly the decisive process of *separation*, traceable to the origins of modern science. Every graduate of a French *lycée* has probably read the famous passage from Descartes’ second *Meditation*, in which he almost poetically *evokes* the sensuous qualities (the scent of flowers, color, taste, consistence) of a piece of wax only to *revoke* shortly afterward the legitimacy of sensuous perception, if we had been tempted to trust in them as to the nature of objects. It is only by a “mental inspection” that they will reveal themselves as they really are: substances whose changes

² Condillac, *La Langue des Calculs*, Book II, Chap. 1, and Book I, Chap. 15.

³ See Eric Weil, *Problèmes Kantiens*, Paris, 1963, pp. 57-107.

are explained by form and movement. Thus the sensuous qualities must be abstracted or only temporarily perceived in order that they be reduced to quantities, to calculable relationships, etc... The *qualities* of ancient philosophy (especially Aristotelian) are replaced by *mechanisms*.

Harvey's discovery must be unquestionably considered as one of the models which Descartes had in mind, since the circulation of blood could only have been demonstrated by isolating and *separating* the circulatory system and using simple *calculations*. For the predecessors of Harvey, beginning with Galen, it was not like that. As Owsei Temkin reminds us, "The presuppositions of Galen went beyond physiology and did not hold the heart to be the seat of vitality. They were the result of the dietetic orientation of ancient Greek medicine, which was attentive to the food and drink of an individual, to environment and which saw in these the necessary conditions for maintaining physical and mental health, as well as the causes of illness and factors capable of protecting or restoring health... The wide ecological interest shown in Greek medicine directed attention to the stomach, veins, liver and right side of the heart on one hand and to the lungs, pores of the skin and the left side of the heart on the other. But that left a host of phenomena unexplained, notably, the presence of blood in the arteries [...] Harvey has been praised for having isolated and resolved a limited problem, thus opening the way for the progress of modern science."⁴ Harvey's originality resides, in fact, in his decision to treat the vascular system as a separate hydraulic apparatus; in making an abstraction of the formation and renewal of blood, etc. It is only a question of a liquid mass in movement in anatomical structures defined by their form and size. As P. Laín Entralgo aptly remarks, Galen had seen that the form and the function of each organ were connected: "For Galen there was no priority of form over function, nor of function over form. Life was a closed circle, and its symbol was the serpent swallowing its tail. Harvey—and along with him an entire phase of modern physiology—saw function as a consequence

⁴ Owsei Temkin, *Galenism*, Cornell University Press, 1973, pp. 156-157.

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of anatomical form [...]. Galen made his experiments in order to understand how the *dynameis* or natural “forces” of the animal were realized: Harvey made his to see how the anatomical form of an organ determined its function. In other words, Harvey’s physiology was the dynamization of Vesalius’ concept of anatomy.”⁵ Decisive progress was thus made possible by an abstract, quantitative and mechanistic view—although Harvey permitted himself to establish analogies between the heart, the sun and the monarch, analogies which still belonged properly to Renaissance thought. But the analogies were independent of the actual demonstration: they were only the rhetorical extension of it. Harvey’s example remains one of the best illustrations we can provide in support of Gaston Bachelard’s impressive formula: “Contemporary science learns from isolated systems.”⁶

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The history of ideas has generally listed two kinds of answers to the “mechanization” of the view of the world and man. The first is of emulation and imitation: we have striven to extend to other areas the methods which had such remarkable results in the exact sciences and in some branches of the natural sciences. Whence the unwise extension of the attempt to give mechanistic explanations to disciplines for which as yet there are no adequate experimental resources at our disposal. We thus present rational generalizations which we try to apply to the arts, not so much to subject them to causal thought as to a certain unifying order. Cassirer is convinced that classic aesthetics is modeled on the theory of physics and mathematics and that it is “through imitation of the ‘unity in multiplicity’ of mathematics that the ‘unity in multiplicity’ of aesthetics demanded by classic theory is achieved.”⁷ The passage from Condillac quoted above shows to what point the

⁵ Pedro Laín Entralgo, *Historia de la medicina moderna y contemporanea*, Barcelona, 1963, p. 157.

⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *La formation de l’esprit scientifique*, Paris, 1938, p. 90.

⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, Tübingen, 1932, II, Chap. 7, p. 386.

model for scientific and logical thought (no longer Cartesian, but Lockeian) was accepted at the end of the 18th century as also valid for the arts and poetry. It is moreover possible that the continuing progress, the new contributions of which the sciences and mathematics were seen to be capable, stimulated, by a sort of contagion, an analogous demand for renewal in the arts. The fashion of considering the literature of yesterday or the day before yesterday as *out of date* is modeled on the rapid changes in scientific knowledge, or, more indirectly, invokes the urgent necessity for a response from art to the transformations in life brought about by the rising importance of technique. Literary "avant-gardes" took their examples from the "advanced" in the sciences. The other answer which the history of ideas has heeded is resistance and opposition. Opposition to mechanization of the view of the world was almost immediately of religious inspiration: the order of the heart was declared superior to the order of the mind (Pascal). Later came those who doubted that man could reach a full understanding of Nature—which he had not created—while he could arrive at an understanding of history, which is his own work (Vico). Historical erudition will not let itself be dethroned by the spirit of calculation (Gibbon). In the domain of natural science, the extremes of a mechanism which was often speculative and unable to give proof for its schematic constructions soon brought the triumphant reply of vitalist thought: life is a mysterious principle which cannot be reduced to the laws of inanimate matter. Finally, while classical mechanics triumphed in the great astronomical systems (Lagrange, Laplace, Herschel), around 1800 was seen the resurgence in literature and art of various prescientific cosmologies of neo-Platonic inspiration, in which Knowing is granted to the imagination, to dreams, to heavenly visions. It was not difficult, in each of these currents, to find a refutation, often vehement, of the view of the world proposed by a mechanistic and calculating science which dispensed with the hypothesis of the soul. After having noted the expansion of the scientific method the history of ideas registered reactions, resistance and refusal. The problem was often posed by historians as a rivalry, a competition, where each of the two

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camps sought to disqualify the claims of the other; such had been, in extreme cases, the struggle between mechanism and vitalism, the Enlightened and anti-Enlightenment, rationalism and irrationalism.

When the picture of a conflict is presented too schematically only a small number of solutions remain available: the triumph of one of the antagonists; a tie which nullifies the argument; or an armistice reconciling them in the name of an identical origin—unless it is by virtue of a common overcoming of the problem (qualified as “dialectic”), in which case the “opponents” join together in a superior unity. But we forget that conflict is not the only manifestation of the life of ideas: there are also divisions, displacements, correlative changes, answers which do not demand evictions or refutations. Although it has been centuries since the upsurge of mathematical language and exact sciences, it is without doubt most interesting to try to discover how certain redistributions came about, and through what compensatory adjustments man adapted himself to the growing authority and efficacy of scientific thought.

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It is to the credit of Joachim Ritter that, in his remarkable study on the birth of the landscape as an object of aesthetic enjoyment, he has shown how the “objective” and *abstract* domination exerted by modern (Copernican) science on Nature left abandoned all the domain of sensuous qualities (important in Ptolemaic and Galenian science); how this territory rejected or deserted by the new science had been recovered through aesthetics; how finally artistic activity itself had again taken the contemplative (*theoria tou kosmou*) in charge. Modern physics, seeking numerical relationships, limited and exact, was no longer interested in this domain. In the process described by Ritter it is not a question of an alternative polemic but of a new division. The universe of feeling, in which science sees a source of error, is going to be vindicated by art and aesthetics as their legitimate terrain and as the place for a knowledge of a different order. While Cartesian

philosophy and the science which issued from it referred only to the examination by the mind, sensuous perception could achieve a new dignity through a subjective approach to the unity and harmony of Nature. Baumgarten (1750), the first to use a term which would become well-known, conceived *aesthetics* as a logic of sensuous perception, capable of arriving at the truth, though in a way inferior to that of the logical perception of philosophy and science. "Aesthetics makes its appearance at the moment when the world and Nature, reduced to their 'Copernican' concept, separate and become distinct from what the world and Nature are in their qualities which are accessible to the senses: the course of the sun through the Zodiac, during the year and as the shepherd perceives it, is not visible to the physicist and mathematician. When a poet who lives close to the sea says that 'the dawn comes up out of the sea,' it is certainly not true for the intellect, but it has an aesthetic truth. While Nature in its totality in the forms of heaven and earth which are human environment is expressed in philosophy and the objective Copernican concept of Nature, subjectivity takes on the task of keeping it present in sentiment and feeling. Poetry and art allow it to be realized aesthetically." Later, Carus will say that with the predominance of a "decomposing science" "eternal, continual creation" will be entrusted to the productive and reproductive activity of the artistic genius.⁸ "For Baumgarten," Ritter says "aesthetic art and logical science complement each other" [...] "In the element of feeling and aesthetic production, poems and paintings bear witness to something which would elude us and disappear without their intervention. What happens aesthetically is not based on a closed and withdrawn subjectivity. Its basis is the need to make apparent, to make present something which would not otherwise be said or looked at."⁹ Thus it is that the aesthetic discovery of the landscape is contemporary with the mechanization of the view of the world, less as a protest against the minimizing methods of science than as the utilization of a liberty and space left

⁸ Joachim Ritter, "Ästhetik," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel-Stuttgart, 1971, Vol. I, 558.

⁹ Joachim Ritter, "Landschaft," in *Subjektivität*, Frankfurt, 1974, pp. 155-163.

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vacant because of a technical mastery resulting from science: Nature becomes less menacing, requires less struggle, offers itself as an object of enjoyment. "The same society, the same civilization which bring man liberty by *reifying* Nature at the same time incite the mind to create the means which keep the richness of the human condition alive and present. Without them society could not give either reality or expression."¹⁰

The brilliantly-developed demonstration of Ritter with regard to the landscape may be extended to the ensemble of modern and romantic art. We can thus be attentive to all the new "objects" to which aesthetic sensitivity has become attached: the city, the machine, speed, dreams, and so on, as though it were a matter of grasping subjectively everything which has been the object of an abstract and mathematical reduction or of a rational interpretation. Let us add that historical arguments proposed by Ritter permit a better understanding of certain contemporary authors. I am thinking particularly of the "two-headed" philosophy of Gaston Bachelard: his thought occupies the two "slopes" located on either side of the dividing line. To begin with, he extols the asceticism which eliminates images and dreams from science. He calls the scholars to order: scientific invention can only be fruitful in the sense of abstract models, of the passage to a higher level of quantification. But this logical purifying of knowledge has created an appeal to the senses for Bachelard. He has realized more than anyone else what ceases to be perceived and dreamed if rational thought should definitively withdraw into the acropolis of mathematized knowledge. Whence the series of works in which the various modalities of feeling and imagination are treated as legitimate means for exploring the intimacy of the world and of consciousness. Bachelard is not the only one to give this example of bilingualism. Eddington, in *The Nature of the Physical World*, cites the hydrodynamic equation for "the early phases of the formation of waves," then quotes a poem by Rupert Brooke on the dance of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.* For the consequences to be drawn with regard to the modern situation of aesthetic experience one should read the very important work of Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, I, Munich 1977.

waves on a winter night. He adds: "In such moments we do not feel inferior to ourselves: in thinking of those moments we do not say how ridiculous it is for a man endowed with six solid senses and a scientific knowledge to let himself play around in this manner. The next time I shall take along my treatise on hydrodynamics! It is good that we have such moments. How shabby and stunted life would be if we did not attach to the exterior world some other meaning than the one we obtain from the measurements of physics apparatus or mathematical symbols!"¹¹ Marcel Raymond adds a penetrating comment to this passage: "I don't suppose that anyone dreams of reducing this opposition by suppressing one of its terms and dares to say, for example, 'What is contained in hydrodynamics is the truth; there is only illusion in the poet's words, a smoke which dissipates in the wind—or the opposite, that only the poet holds the truth while the scholar moves in illusion.' [...] Eddington presents us with two different languages [...] These two languages put us into relationship with two realities, with two very different worlds. Because it should not be thought that the poet strives to seize in words *the same thing* that the physicist attempts to present in signs. It should not be believed that the poet's experience, authentic as it is, can be put into figures, reduced to measurable quantities." While the "physicist retires from the world," Marcel Raymond sees in the poet a being who is "in the middle of things." "My hypothesis is that this 'nature' in whose intimacy we feel we exist is not exactly commensurable with that which the physicist catches in his net and describes in algebraic language. I believe that it is not measurable in any way. That 'nature' I call metaphysical"... But at the moment when the critic's option in favor of poetry is seen, it is wise to recall the complementary relationship pointed out by Ritter: it is because the measurable, the objective have such an extension that the subjective, the non-measurable become sensed and precious to us. Then poetry turns toward them

¹¹ Quoted by Marcel Raymond, "Le Sens de la qualité," in *Etre et dire*, Neuchâtel, 1970, p. 273 *et seq.* See also Graham Dunstan Martin, *Language, Truth and Poetry*, Edinburgh, 1975.

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and in truth discovers them, since without it they risk being considered as mere residues and disappearing from our lives.

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In the interpretation Roger Caillois¹² proposes, the bilingualism science/poetry is justified in the real itself. Science with its mathematical language goes straight to the center, to the roots. That is, the nucleus where the real is at its maximum; poetry, *sensitivity*, inhabit “the sparkling surface of the world,” that is, the zone where central energies multiply and branch out into the infinite of appearances. Man has more than two ways of approach. These, equally, find their full epistemological justification in distinct areas, in the very heart of the world. The combination of the *complex effects* of Nature finds its correspondent in the combination of sensitivity and word play. Poetry is not only another perception of Nature; it is a knowledge pertinent to a particular area of natural reality. Complementarity does not intervene only at the level of activity of the subject (at times calculating, at times feeling and dreaming) but is expressed in the universe itself, between the “central” regularities (in which the universe is a physicist) and the “surface” irregularities (in which the universe is a poet).

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Documents are not lacking if we seek confirmation in history for a growing interest in *feelings* in aesthetics, as scientific language purifies and perfects its abstract precision. As far back as we may go, poetry uses elements of feeling, combines them or subtly compares them, sings the praises of the sensuous joys, but early poets or theoreticians did not think of assigning sensitivity to poetic composition as one of its necessary conditions. The conscious recourse to the idea of feeling is a relatively recent cultural acquisition.

¹² In the text appearing in this issue.

Classical poetics demanded two qualities from the poet, that only a favorable star could combine in correct proportions: reason (Horace uses the verb *sapere*) and the willingness to be guided, or carried away, by a mysterious rapture, “frenzy,” in which a divine power was assumed to take over the consciousness of the poet. True, the classical doctrine spoke of imagination and not of rapture: the analogy between poetry and painting invited the definition of reason as the equivalent of *design* (which must prevail) while *imagination* provided, often in a subordinate manner, *color*... When the aesthetics of *genius* became prevalent, with Diderot and his contemporaries, it was not long until the creative faculty of the poet freed itself from submission to an imitation of Nature. The artist created *like* Nature, not in imitation of Nature. And what spoke in him, *genius*, could also be called sentiment. But after the effusions of Romanticism the moment came when the concept of sentiment with its moral implications and rhetorical content seemed impure and blurred. For the more rigorous moralists or for the more pleasure-seeking aesthetes the term *sensitiveness* seemed more appropriate. Baudelaire wrote, “Do not scorn the sensitiveness of anyone. His sensitiveness is his genius.”¹³ It may be said that with the beginning of Romanticism one of the lines taken by the evolution of art was that of conferring on *feeling*, on *sensation*, an ever-increasing function of the revelation of reality. It is the very seat of the manifestation of individual existence in its greatest singularity. And it is at the same time the seat of an ontological manifestation where the universality of earthly existence is announced through the singularity of a unique, authentic, non-renewable perception. For the Proustian hero, it is *sensation*—independent of will or intellect—which furnishes the key to the “interior book”: “I had to try to interpret feelings as signs of so many laws and ideas, in attempting to think, that is, to bring forth from the darkness what I had felt, to concert it into a spiritual equivalent. Now, was this means, which seemed to me the only one, anything other than making a work of art? Only the *impression*, however paltry the material seemed, however faint

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, *Fusées*, XII.

its traces, was a criterion of the truth. For that reason it deserved to be understood by the mind, because only the mind was able, if it could disengage this truth, to lead it toward a greater perfection and give it a pure joy. Impressions are for a writer what experiments are for the scholar, with the difference that with the scholar the work of the intellect comes first and with the writer it comes afterward."¹⁴ But it was still possible to grant a more glorious role to sensibility and to renounce the supplementary labor of the intellect, the effort of reflective translation demanded by Proust. It was possible to concentrate on the sensitive, on the act of sensing an absolute attention, to confer on it a final prerogative in uniting the sensual qualities of the exterior world to the interior universe of the body, to the point of attaining a "sensoriality" totally absorbed in itself. It would be easy to show, in the literature of our century, the constantly more important part played by the elementary consciousness of the body, the kinesthetic perception at times associated with the thrust of a motor activity, which is the manifestation of a drive connected to the very energy of life (which our mythology designates as Desire) "Kinesthetics, *mare nostrum*, mother of the absurd,"¹⁵ writes Henri Michaux. We arrive at declaring that after having invented the terrestrial landscape as an object of aesthetic enjoyment, art has enlarged its "contemplatable" territory to include an *intracorporal* dimension. And this evolution may be explained by the fact that poetry, imitating science, tries continually to surpass its achievements in the direction of a new domain (but with less chance of discovering limitless new inhabitable terrain) and by the fact that, objective science itself always going farther ahead in the reification of the knowledge of vital mechanisms, the subjective reply has become indispensable. It is necessary to reclaim the irreducible and unanalyzable flavor of corporal existence as we experience it in order to reproduce in a spoken and heard truth that to which biology brings us in the currents of action and molecular change.

¹⁴ Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, Paris, Pléiade, Vol. III, pp. 878-880.

¹⁵ Henry Michaux, *Face à ce qui se dérobe*, Paris, 1975, p. 10. The spelling of Michaux, *coenesthésie*, comes closest to the etymology. It concerns "general sensibility."

Other explanations may be given for this aesthetic annexation of intra-corporal territory: the lifting of all the tabus concerning the body concedes to words and curiosity a domain formerly forbidden. Thus everything happens as though having reaped an ample harvest from the spectacle offered by the world, sensation flowing back over itself seeks to recognize itself at its source, no longer solely in sensuous objects but in pure *feeling*: we see the radicalization of the *subjective* dimension of *aisthesis*, become sensation by means of sensation, or the sensation of sensation. At this degree of the autonomy of feeling the "exterior" world is abandoned, and fantasy and onirism take over the entire stage, against a background of visceral messages. Language, released from its task, is shown by the reciprocal play of its elements: at this moment it is also no longer in rapport with the world but in rapport with itself. This retreat into the "depths," into this thicket peopled by the glimmers that body and language are for each other, certainly carries with it the danger of the loss of the world (which we also call narcissistic regression or schizophrenia). But here danger is the price to pay so that the conscience may again find a perception prior to the schism between the exterior and the interior, the objective and the subjective. Surrealism had this ambition, for which philosophical warnings were never lacking. Thus without the least concern for giving assistance to surrealism, Cassirer¹⁶ admits a first rapport with the world—physionomical, emotional, mythical—in which the subject participates in phenomena, finds himself ceaselessly involved. Others had spoken less happily of a "prelogical" mentality but had nonetheless insisted on the idea of participation. Now, Cassirer sees in the mythical experience not only the stage genetically anterior to that of rational knowledge but an experience without which reason would not have existed in its specific characteristics. The retreat to sensoriality, the anabasis toward bodily sources thus reconstitutes in us the equivalent of a retreat in time, dreamt of by those who are tormented by a nostalgia for a lost primitive language. The earliest myths live again, not

¹⁶ In the first part of the third volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 1929.

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in memory but through a force which is always present. Since then it is no longer a question of division—poetry speaking its own language *alongside* scientific discourse—but of a basic unity in which a being appears in its earthly manifestation, *anterior* to all division, before science defined its methods and its territory.

This legitimization of poetry by the basic unity of which it has repeatedly given evidence sends us back to the constitutive experience of the body and the world, reimplants us at the basic level where being awoke to itself: the bilingualism of science and poetry, which takes us back to the point of emergence of language and signs. But this anterior time, this primitivism (with its analogies of paradise and childhood), however necessary it may be to be reattached to their underlying presence, however authentic may be the ontological support we may expect from them, nevertheless represent a backward step. Unity is offered to us, as we have seen, at the price of a retreat, a loss of the world. In fact, we must have left behind, abandoned this primary unity in order to think of it as a primary unity and feel the benefit of refinding it as an eternally verdant paradise. The *division* will thus have been necessary, so that we can go back to the sources of feeling and the earlier plenitude. We cannot forget the division when we strive nostalgically to return (“sentimentally,” as Schiller said) beyond the division, looking for a refuge in a universe without gaps (or a universe of continual abundance, which is the same thing). It is precisely because of the division that the horizon which preceded it may be thought of and desired as an undivided and *primary* world.

To this temptation to be retrospective poetry has opposed (or sometimes merely *added*) a legitimization of prospectivity, seeking a future time or future remote space where the confusion of language and the dichotomy of rational knowledge and impassioned feeling would be overcome. Since Romanticism, the idea of an overcoming of contradictions has been imposed as the most urgent task. Thus Friedrich Schlegel, defining romantic poetry as “universal progressive poetry” assigned to it a mission of conciliation: “The history of modern poetry is a constant commentary on this short philosophical text: all art

must become science and all science must become art. Philosophy and poetry must be united.”¹⁷ Expressed in this way, the exigency of a reciprocal metamorphosis went beyond the resources of science and poetry as they were practiced in Schlegel’s day; still today it is not within our reach. Even more, it is not in the mouthing of poetic and scientific language that the desired unity will be achieved. It is too soon to take the work of scientific reason away from its own task. The Romantics who got entangled with “poeticizing” science became lost in speculative fog and premature syntheses. What poetry can do is of an entirely different order: it can make us experience that the most perfect objective knowledge for the “finished beings” that we are can never make up the entirety of life and feeling. Poetry reminds us of the fragmentariness of our existence, of our limitations. On the other hand, because it opens to our minds a meaning larger than the words it uses, it arouses a call to liberty which gives no rest to whoever has been able to perceive it. A call without a determined content but able to receive all of them. Our gaze is then directed toward the future, toward the imminence perceived through the rush of the moment. The excess of feeling of which poetry is capable is the anticipatory *shape* of all the other excesses of feeling which are still lacking to us, as much in our desire for knowledge as in the aridity of our daily existence. Through the free invention of complex images and structures which my readers will see as a celebration of *contingency* and a system of *necessary* correlations, poetry is able to offer in a verbal microcosm, the model in which is found prefigured analogically and virtually, the universal communication of minds, the crowning of knowledge in happy contemplation. It suffices that poetry be only the promise, so that its presence may be as the water which changes the face of the desert.

¹⁷ Fragment 116 of the *Athenäum*.