

THE MAGIC WORDS

We must begin from the principle that all language is necessarily limited. The art of speaking is a common heritage, even if it is wasted. It has so lost its mystery (more precisely; we are so calm in its possession) that we consider it almost as a gift of nature. Nevertheless, it must be learned; it is, in fact, a product of education, even for those who might believe that they have never received any. Like all acquired disciplines, then, it is the fruit of a long process of restraint. Manuals exist which teach Latin without tears. Learning the first language seems to take place without recourse to handbooks and hickory sticks, but this is because a vast program is available, full time, along with dedicated teachers who do not keep an eye on the clock, and fresh intellects who never think their knowledge is sufficient. Instruction is difficult in spite of all this, for the task is more challenging than adults imagine it to be.

Fortunately the child does not realize the enormity of his problems. It seems that nature has provided for the articulation of sounds. Even dogs are capable of identifying objects through their imaginary relation with the name we assign them. But to achieve a verbal grasp of obscure thoughts; to perceive the thoughts of others expressed in what are only sounds; to conjugate verbs by extrapolating several examples which no one told

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him to extrapolate and for which the child must invent a paradigmatic value; to enter into the subtle complicities of *we* and *you*, which presupposes a preliminary notion of the interchangeable mobility of the individual; to penetrate into the den of Trophonius called the future, the lure for all fears and all hopes; to master the astonishing connotations of irony, that cheerful disguise which says the opposite of what is thought while expressing an idea faithfully. all this would be extravagantly complex if it were only theory. But it is the business of grammarians and philosophers to complicate things. The child goes at it like Monsieur Jourdain who does not look at himself when he speaks. Never mind, I find that Monsieur Jourdain has much in his favor.

Is the child really aware of these limitations? It is said that he is aided by those crutches called structures. He unwraps words like the piece of candy wrapped in its tinfoil. A little monkey could do as much. The child is always the older of the two: he eats the candy, but he keeps the shiny paper because he already knows that he will have a chance to use it once more. Is this a strategy which he must learn, or is it a secret laboratory which just functions automatically, like digestion? With the help of the evidence of things or through a filter, already intelligent like a muscle is already strong, the child jumps from concept to concept as he will later cross a stream by jumping from one conveniently placed stone to another. These wrappings, these stones are all restraints. Like all techniques, language is closely monitored by inhibitory actions. If the child can find his way in the giant slalom of prohibitions and imagination, then he has great confidence in himself. Or perhaps he has an even greater confidence in the power of discourse.

In any case, he is not the only one to suffer these difficulties; it is he, in fact, who suffers least from them. We all have problems with language. I see some who prefer to keep silent; others who know that the gift of the word is a stimulant and use it sparingly, in monosyllables; others who suffer from trying too hard; and still others who are stunned by speech and pushed to the incontinence of all lusts. In general we all are painfully aware of our insufficiencies in vocabulary. A word will not come when called, whether it be because of our ignorance or our laziness or

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a memory failure. Hand me the gadget! Or again, we bypass the hazards of language by using our hands. Catch-words and meaningful gestures are accepted in common language with a facile indulgence. The more scrupulous prefer to employ the alibi of the definition or the periphrase which can replace indigence with verbose impotence. Sometimes too it is the language itself which is not up to the task: I seek an adequation between my thought and its future expression, and I realize that I must take a detour because *adequation*, which is part of an entire family, has lost its father, the corresponding verb.

The adequation of noun to object, which is one of the constraints of language, is nothing compared to the doubts raised by the adequation of the discourse to the thought. There is no possibility of the thought entering the consciousness in its authentic and non-elaborated form. It must first be disfigured so that it can fit into ready-made garb, never personally tailored apparel. To select an utterance is to describe a murder: I can only recognize therein the corpse which I so loved alive; and the obligation of answering by a *yes* or a *no*, as I am sometimes forced to do, is in itself a strange sort of perversion. I know that I can only see some of the sides of a prism, but I imagine the dotted outline of the lines which cannot be seen. The dotted outlines of a thought can never be supplied. It is said that language impoverishes thought, and yet it is the only means at our disposal to state our thoughts and even to know them. A laborious means, extravagant and inefficient, like impedimenta in general which are the sole means of logistics. With obtuse slowness and painful amputations, discourse covers over the underlying perspectives of the initial images. This is because, unlike the other arts, it is not true, whatever might be said, that literature uses a raw material. It can only use language which is already an instrument. It is not a piece of iron to be shaped on the anvil, it is the anvil. It can be taken or it can be left, but the poet has nothing but his hands on the anvil. It will be said that he has his thoughts and his imagination, but these too are words, and only words. And so thought, which was a seed, is polluted and decays in discourse. At a certain point obligation is more censure than constraint.

The idea of censure and the idea of infinite are those which

the mind is most impatient with. The imagination, which forms our advanced defense against our own limitations, rises up naturally against these. In fact, it is this struggle which enriches languages every day. For its part, literature should be able to profit from this, but it must wage its own battles under constraint, under the difficult conditions of a subsistence economy. It must content itself with very little, knowing that nothing can ever satisfy it. It prospers only by reacting violently against its misery. If the poet believes that he knows and feels something, then that very something must have a name known by all. If we know well what we want to say, it is as if it were said all by itself. This is the great lesson of Boileau. But what about things which I know poorly or which I only barely imagine? Precisely, they are not worth the trouble of being said. He must have been quite rich to forbid himself what was forbidden him. For my part, I would be better able to tolerate my indigence if it did not depend on laws which have been imposed on me. I want very much to say what I know only barely, if only to prove to myself that those things are or are not (how should I say it?) sayable. I know authors who admit not knowing when they sit down to write what path they are going to take. They had nothing to conceive, then, either well or less so. They had perhaps the freedom of being the first to be astonished after having described their landing place. It is not always clarity of ideas which provides the strength or beauty or effectiveness of a literary discourse. If this were true, entire pages of literature—and of language also—would dissolve in an immense conflagration. Boileau says things clearly, and he wants others to do the same, for he cannot conceive confusion, inability and anger. We have long since lost such charming serenity.

Objectively, the fact that I cannot express explicitly in discourse that which I am discovering about what I feel does not void my experience. If I were active in a scientific area, this would only prove that I still had a long way to go and that ultimately I would admit perhaps that I was wrong (or right). If I create literature, this proves nothing. It may even be that the ambiguity of my concepts is artistically profitable if the approximation of the wrapping can appropriately protect its little mystery. On the other hand, ignorance and confusion

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are not incompatible with beauty. Many primitives draw better than I; on the contrary, their technical skills, which were excellent, did not spare Chapelain or the Abbé d'Aubignac from disaster. The first travelers to see a rhinoceros, using the rudimentary means of their language, described it upon their return as a horse with a horn on the forehead. The unrefined impertinence of this first description allowed the collective imagination, on a purely visual level, to develop the timid delicacy and the virginal grace of the unicorn. The rhinoceros does not have such charms; but the travelers were not bearers of an object but of an image, the generalization of which silenced the possible unsightliness of the beast. And so a clumsy definition can, like primitive works of art, stylize touching beauty with brief innocence. I would like to be the Christopher Columbus of such a monumental error. Conversely, the beauty given can also be easily depreciated or soiled by the imagination. Perhaps it is not a question of good concepts but simply of concepts as such.

At an age when she knew nothing of dreams, my daughter woke up one night in tears. She was unable to describe the scene in which she had been invited to take part for the first time: "My sleep talked," was all that she was able to say. The expression was certainly not adequate. Without knowing it, the child used the common subterfuge of substituting words for an unknown term: Hand me the gadget! She compensated for a lack of knowledge with a subrogation. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between these two processes which have the same linguistic behavior. Faced with the challenge of vocabulary, the one took advantage of a convenient panacea which can be repeated just as effectively (or as ineffectively) for an indefinite number of times; the other means only to refer to the exact circumstances of her present problem which is resolved in an exclusive and logically pertinent manner. She invented, in the true sense of the word, a significant although improper expression. This expression has such a unique sense that it can only be repeated at the most in order to restate the same thing. But already it is felt that such will no longer be useful. It refers to a personal experience which the child cannot describe clearly but which she conceives and defines in a temporarily satisfactory manner by analogy with previous experiences, none of which

completely resembles this one. Relative to language, there is, on the one hand, a forward escape and, on the other, a will to power. In other words, the first of these facts is rooted in linguistics while the other seems to be already peering into the area of literature.

It is very helpful to follow this stare. For it is not just that truth comes from the mouths of babes, but also that only too often poets are considered as big children. Additionally this allows us to glance at another aspect of the problem which is not without relation to the central core of our question. I just employed two rather common ways of speaking, concerning children and that first innocence which resembles both the naked truth and that language spoken by poets. Are these traditional expressions, based on what is commonly referred to as folk wisdom, compatible? They are also used frequently in the study of literature, along with other terms, whose precision and exact application to our research raise a number of doubts. The poet and the child, magic and poetry: can these comparisons be seriously maintained even if they often bring smiles, or do they belong in the great rag-bag of impressionist criticism? By using them, perhaps we only abuse words to disguise our inability to see clearly. An examination of the methods of magic and of the understanding of infants should be able to provide answers to these questions.

We say, "I dreamed, I had a dream, in my dream I saw." These expressions belong to tribal language. We have the right to choose, but we cannot say it in any other way. We can ask if it is useful to invent new words to express what has already been said. The fact of disposing of a series of parallel expressions is already a luxury. But this latter circumstance proves also that the same thing can be said in a variety of different ways. If I say, however, "My sleep talked to me last night," I have the impression that I have not used a different manner *like the others*. It is not in the same register and will not have the same status within the tribe. If I say it, I am sure of shocking one or several persons. This shock will probably be unpleasant (not

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serious but disagreeable) in a certain context, as in colloquial language, for example. Of course there are people who practice a precious kind of speech, but they bear a label which sets them off, like butterflies in a display case. As for me, if I said that to someone, in the bus, I know that he would look at me strangely and that he would be quick to recount the incident to our common friends, along with his commentaries on my exact bearing at the moment. If I could, on the other hand, set this expression into a little poem of my own creation, I will not say that that would transform me immediately into a great poet, but I would not be otherwise dissatisfied. "And sleep spoke of shadows from the past, the speech of sleep darker than the night." I would try to find some place to use it.

There is, then, a difference of quality between the two uses of the same statement which comes from their context. According to the environment, there can be either a value A or a value B. To understand whence comes disapproval A or how I earned reward B, I can only be assisted by the imperturbable statement which remains exactly as I stated it and which is expressed less by its intrinsic value than by its circumstances. If my friend in the bus deigned to answer me, I think that he would do so in terms such as nonsense, twaddle and even rubbish. He would be correct, for we both know that sleep does not talk; in fact that is what it least does. Thus, not only does my statement sound false, it in fact is false. Nevertheless, my dear friend, we saw *Macbeth* together. Do you remember? "Macbeth kills sleep." It seems to me that that did not sound false.—Ah yes, but it is not the same thing.—And why is it not the same thing? Because it was Shakespeare, or because it was Macbeth? More probably because they both speak a different language in which all that becomes true. I note, then, simply that that which is true for B smells of falsehood for A. But it is not because of what I say to them, since I am saying the same thing to them, but of what they want to understand.

Ultimately it is position A that is correct. There it is evident that my statement is illogical. It can even be said that it is irrational. This is the same thing, but it places us on a different level. It was not necessary to beat so long about the bush; we have all known, and for a long time, that literature is ir-

rational. But what I am looking for is the irrationally functional. I want my unreason to give me its reasons and its norms, if it has any, for I am not sure that my curiosity itself is reasonable. Nevertheless, if I know how to compose unreasonable discourses from deliberate statements, and admitting that all the preceding is true, it seems to me that I must know how to say how I go about it.

“Sleep talks” is an unexceptional example of irrational language. This language, as we saw, may be irrational, but it is not fallacious since in fact it expresses better what it says less correctly. Reality is not denied nor covered over with useless information. It is just that a dream, which common language presents as a passive activity, a state or a fabrication, is here described as an active presence and an aggression. Without knowing it Monsieur Jourdain invented metaphor, offered us personification and for little would have produced *prosopopoeia*. Whatever the case may be, this statement is neither a definition nor a description, but a simple image. From the very fact of its affective connotations, the image loses in precision what it gains in vitality. However, this is the characteristic sign of magic thought (Lévy-Bruhl). Just as in a magic action which supposes a revelation, I do not have the need and perhaps I do not have the possibility of verifying the details to assume direct knowledge of that which consciousness presents me as reality. The logic of a poet, like the thinking of a primitive, is a poor instrument of analysis but a very cleverly insinuated invitation to accept something. Reason has nothing to do with the act of acceptance, just as in politics. Rationality begins at the moment when my attention is shifted from the revealed content to the container whose linguistic or semiological use is never pertinent. I no longer see myself in the mirror, or I see myself poorly, if I begin examining the moldings on its frame. Or, as we say, I no longer see the forest for the trees.

Irrational language thus expresses stronger but less generally credible truths than those offered by the world of objects. Just like the images which it uses or like the magic in which it takes part, it requires confident abandon to attain this result. Poetry has no power over the unconsenting reader who, by this very fact, is not truly a reader but is like the churchgoer described

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by Chamfort who did not weep during the sermon since he belonged to another parish. Why did the poet seek out this additional difficulty?

Some suppose that it was because of his congenital laziness. A widely-held common error says that poetry's particular language is the easiest. The poet has it easy to simply talk in gibberish instead of devoting himself to "serious" things. Others, on the contrary, think that the language of reason, narrowly channeled and consequently narrow itself, is more immediately accessible and simpler (A. Breton). We saw, in any case, that it is poorer. Whatever might be the case, there is a misunderstanding somewhere. The two linguistic levels are not comparable other than with respect to their common linguistic foundation. We can compare the cost price and the cruising speed of two aircraft; it seems pointless to compare the number of seats in a passenger plane to the fire power of a fighter. The problem has been incorrectly stated, even more so, if we admit that irrational language is not the result of a choice but of hard necessity.

The consubstantial irrationality of literary discourse is implicitly anticipated in the hypothesis which makes inspiration responsible for the creation of a poem. Under one form or another, everyone admits it, but in a thousand different ways. There too lies a fundamental question: since the role of inspiration is conceived differently, the ambiguity of the problem implies several solutions, or perhaps none at all. Does inspiration make of the poet a voice, a drive belt, an altar or a sacred laboratory? There is nothing left to do but to attempt to explain the inexplicable. Is it not simply the primary source of discourse, the *primum movens* which stimulates the imagination and incites it to speak? Inspiration is then a simple stimulus, even if we presume it to be accompanied by mysterious indulgence and readiness. This would be, perhaps, only an added capacity or a rapidity or a totality of association, followed by an exhaustion of particular values, as in the case of Paul Valéry's Leonard. It seems proper, however, that an illusion of transcendence has rubbed off on this latter interpretation which, perhaps even in spite of itself, tends to conceive of a poem as a given or a suggested product.

The difficulties arise most frequently from the confusion of

terms we use. We do not distinguish, or we distinguish too much, between linguistic discourse and literary discourse. It is no doubt of no help to suppose differences of nature or of source; we can only detect differences of mission. One expresses what is, the other expresses what is not but which presents itself as being so. It was normal that this new definition should change the direction of linguistic discourse as much as its circumstances in order to adapt the old instrument to new needs. It adapted itself so that at the end of a long series of experiences randomly repeated it became what it is with no one aware of the path it had taken. We can, however, recognize in the long passage toward this never acknowledged and even never anticipated goal; irrational remnants issuing from old anamneses and which still suffice to justify it: a methodology all its own and a choice which is also a commitment. Valéry assigned the poet the complex role of "source, engineer and constraint." It is this triple wrapping which produces the specificity of the limitations of discourse. I would distinguish (and it is all the same, whatever names we devise to stick on them) a source which is in turn availability, choice, entertainment and commitment; an engineer who computes and builds, who calculates and plans, who knows his tools better than he manages his thoughts, accompanied by a method which is in reality the anamnesis or nostalgia for sources; and a constraint which is methodically applied to the industry of the poet as producer of poems.

As entertainment, the object of literature is to exhaust receptivity. In other words it is meant to fill a vacuum. We could just as correctly say that it meets a need, if the abhorrence of a vacuum is not just empty talk. We know that other types of distraction exist, more immediately accessible, more effective and, if we may say so, more entertaining. Thus it really is a matter of choice, and one which has not been left simply to chance: *to read (lire)* supposes a preference in the same way as does *to choose (élire)*. As in all forms of entertainment, this choice determines only the type of activity selected; nevertheless,

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it necessarily implies the knowledge and acceptance of the rules of the game.

What is true for the author is no less so for the reader. They accept all pre-established conditions. The reader, for example, gives his acquiescence to the abandon of certain objective criteria such as the principle of identity or the need for correspondence between signs and objects. He has never really thought about these principles, and it is in all innocence that he applies them in his life. We can even say that fundamentally he does not even know them. Perhaps it will be just as easy for him to pretend not to know them when he reads. In any case, he feigns with pleasure, for this helps him in his design. He is not looking for the reality of objects in his reading, but the truth of things, and he knows that the one can sometimes becloud the other. He will then accede to these profound truths by different paths. He will be content with a message composed of scandalously abnormal images which are concrete due to their nature as images and abstract because of the signs which they evoke. He knows that he will discover neither pure concepts nor objects, but images and symbols which belong to an artificial and iridescent world. He promises to devote attention to passages from which he expects only irritation or sadness. He accepts the fact that the language is tormented and maltreated or that he is offered only a coded form of discourse which is frequently laborious and uncertain to decipher. He then accepts many things and makes concessions of which he is only vaguely aware—abdications which are only too apparent, conversely, for those who do not accept them, and such people are even more numerous. The common expression says that you have to break the eggs to make an omelette; a reader knows that good literature cannot be made without breaking words. He accepts this willingly, and he is not wrong. The best part of the word is hidden under its shell.

There is even better to come, since everything that he abandons, he abandons obligingly, pushed perhaps even to do so with devotion. To read otherwise is either a wasted effort or else recollection in the midst of the storm. For one must feel oneself free, no matter what the circumstances. A true reader has “several of the characteristics of a pious man” (Alain), and the “enjoyment

of reading" is the necessary condition for admiring it (Bachelard). All bygone readers knew this and practiced this form of devotion: Petrarch died with his head bent over a text he was reading by candlelight; Machiavelli put on his best Sunday clothes to read the Latin classics; Ronsard locked his doors for three days, the time to re-read the *Iliad*. We are in a greater hurry than they and also less reverential. We are more interested in a variety of small dishes than in large succulent courses. No one asks of us any more a state of grace, a trance preceded by ablutions, but at least that loving devotion, almost Salesian in nature, which is limited to prior consent. The reader has need of it; who could read the great authors of the past if he did not attest to finding pleasure therein? (Alain)

For us the literary act has become familiar and our respect has been dulled. Nevertheless, the reader who settles into his armchair, even if he is wearing his everyday jacket or his pyjamas, even if he reads in bed, this reader is still behaving like a Machiavelli. He no doubt does not have the impression that he is awaiting the visit of a winged grace, but the pleasure of reading precedes the act of reading. Outside noises are eliminated, the striking of the clock and the arm gone numb pass unnoticed. The reader does not notice the open window nor the anonymous parade of printed letters. He considers inside himself the bodiless signs which meet, associate and in the end offer him the image of a world. A distant village is given to him miraculously, or perhaps only an idea of a village, with a white-washed house, although no one had told him it was white-washed. An hidalgo like himself sinks into an imaginary armchair to seek in a tome even more distant and less clear images. None of this really exists; who can still be interested in such trifles? One must be strangely intoxicated in order to believe still in the magic of literary discourse.

And yet, the readers who agree to sign over the suspension of their reason for an imaginary mess of pottage are legion. They are committed against all evidence to the fact that inert words can have an effect on reality, that the silences of the written discourse speak louder than a neighbor. The statement becomes the burning bush filled with a divine presence and the fertile shadow in which the manna grows. It is all of us and

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entirely so. Perhaps it is necessary to see in this the only way for us to put up with one another and to love one another, to resolve the problem of that "unsociable sociability" of men (Kant), which pushes us to seek ourselves and to know ourselves through others, and at the same time to recognize others in ourselves. This knowledge is the most rapid, the most agile and by far the most complete of all. Flaubert remarked that a woman drawn is only a woman while a woman described in words is all women at once. It is even more than Caligula himself had requested. At our feet we have a world which is even more vast than our own; but we must enter there by the narrow gate of prior agreement. Mental images can only be projected on a background of confidence which is like the pocket version of faith. If Dante was led by Virgil, it is above all because Virgil was a magician.

From the author's point of view, the commitment involves the how and the why of his choice and implies the mental content of his availability. He has every chance of containing as well, intentionally and transparently, the last ends of his art. An objective is a desired object; the poet no doubt knows what he wants, but this is not an object, for this can only exist as such at the moment when the desire is fulfilled. The goal he pursues, or perhaps the goal which pursues him, is nothing more than a desire for an object. Nevertheless, the fact of anticipating a future object is already a source of confusion.

The object leads us to sensible realities of the so-called objective world. In fact, the writer's art seems to meet the definition of all representative arts. Ultimately we always think of Mother Nature behind art. We do not notice that from one ricochet to another the magic depths, or at least the extremely unusual habits of literary discourse, do not point to the shortest way for attaining the realist or real object of literature. The critical spirit made its choice a very long time ago, at the time when nature itself was the first surprise and the source of all mysteries. We still believe in nature even while at the same time we are stripping it.

We still think of literature as an attempt to “firm up the unstable” (Valéry). This paradox is not easily admissible. On the one hand, after having tried to establish and to have even practiced an intellectual art which purifies the contingent, Valéry leads us toward immediate regions and toward perishable objects. On the other hand, he himself established the fact that literature is not a firming up. This is not as if he considers poetry to be an operation in cryogenics. It is possible to see in his ideas a respectable classical remnant. All critics, from Plato to the Renaissance and from Boileau to Lessing have made of literature an art of imitating nature, *ut pictura*. This is not the place to discuss the opinions of Plato or of Lessing; the temptation does exist, however, to identify clearly a fundamental parallogism thanks to which what was method has been transformed into finality.

The imitation of nature and, in the second place, the imitation of great models, has always been considered literature’s elementary school. And it remains so, as is proven by Valéry, who seems to still believe this, and all the critics along with him. This is an undeniable fact, and there is no reason for us to be astonished by it. The poet speaks “naturally,” in a way resembling our own, and he talks to us of things which interest us “really.” There is a confusion which is greater than simply an insufficiency of words. First of all, nature is an elementary school; even if we accept the premise that all schools are good, it would perhaps be helpful not to discredit it, but to put it in its proper place. We go to this school because there is no other. It is three thousand years old and has proven its value, but it is no less true that all instruction must conclude when the student becomes a master. It is a school-prison. It teaches a great deal and helps little. Its rules are effective and easy to remember; a false rhyme will always be a false rhyme, and it is within the grasp of everyone to create a simile or an apostrophe. And since by chance the strength of this school is to use rules which we already know how to employ, this aids in keeping literature hitched to the plow of the plastic arts.

Of course it is easy to observe that literary discourse still offers presences, like painting for example. Among the classics there is a certain desire to evoke precise contours and sense

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presences, and it would seem that with Romanticism it is possible to affirm this desire to firm up the Heraclitean instability spoken of by Valéry. Accumulated scruples, fashions, a poorly understood spirit of emulation or the temptation of taking the easy way out can advise the writer of more or less marked instances in the art of description, and it is credible that he then uses advantageously his experience of the plastic arts. But these are methods and should not be confused with the goal.

Every transfer from nature or from other representational arts would be completely at random. That which is proposed by literary discourse is not offered elsewhere; that should suffice for avoiding any subsequent confusion with the idea of reproduction. At every degree literary discourse is necessarily new since it is in the process of being invented. We already know it, and this is what we mean when we say that literary discourse has no referent. The beginning and the end of literary discourse drop off into nothingness like the stars. The eternal *catoblepas* which is unraveled as it grows and is defined, a poem depends only on itself.

And yet it is that which makes me believe; this is the trap which I must piously admit. Prior consent cannot be purchased and it cannot be the subject of negotiations. It is a matter of pure pleasure, of becoming a child once more and of believing. I am no doubt obeying a certain anamnesis, a childhood intuition or Mother Goose tale which I have forgotten but which still has an effect on me. It is, in any case, a return to innocence. Only literature knows how to create words which do not mislead even while they are lying. I am no doubt in some way responsible for this, perhaps in large part, since it is I who chase after the joy of being fooled. But the poet has not promised me anything other than that. What is the force which supports his deceptive discourse? It would seem that he thinks he is the God who created the world by pronouncing the first word. Could words really have such power?

As a matter of fact, they still do. They have known things which we can no longer remember; they contain in their secret

memories dormant forms. In their weary sonorities they carry the pollen of the millennia when understanding was born. These are not simply images. J.L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*, 1962) has carefully distinguished (and for the first time, if I am not mistaken) between descriptive statements (I think we should rather call them informative or referential) and performative statements, the latter forming in themselves an action and a creative process. When I say "It is raining," I am describing a circumstance which exists objectively whether I say it or not; the words only serve to make an observation or to communicate information. When I say "I swear," by the very fact of my statement I become something that I had not been, someone who has sworn. I have consequently created a new fact which had not been so formed by pre-existing realities and which becomes another reality by the sole force of the words spoken. We are all familiar with and if necessary we all know how to use this performative language without our being overly conscious of the confidence which we ascribe to the power of words. Herein resides the operative power of sacramental formulas. It is necessary that someone say "I marry you" in order that a couple be transformed into man and wife. If a certificate of the truth of this fact is drawn up, or if an inscription is made in a register, there is no other proof of the reality of the marriage than the circumstance of the words spoken. The consecration or the recognition of the new fact will only take place *a posteriori* and precisely in order to establish what was said, which means what was done.

We can and should summarize this matter. Quite quickly it is clear that words do not make objects but facts; but I did not say that literature was an object. We might have reservations about the absolute value of the observation and about the reality of the projected facts. If it is true that two people can marry on the strength of a spoken formula, this is not necessarily possible for everyone, nor in every circumstance. Formulas of this kind generally suppose a second presence, that of God or of the law or of conscience, which are limiting powers by definition and which have arrogated to themselves the right of establishing as reality what is only an illusion. The strong-minded are correct; but this is precisely what was to be de-

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monstrated. I admit the fact that all these remarks are well-founded, all the more readily since they can be applied as such to the circumstances of literary discourse.

The officiant and the bridal couple do not create the new fact of marriage by some power which belongs to them alone; they can do nothing outside these prescribed circumstances and these words to be pronounced. I can only repeat these conditions, for we know them already. The bridal couple must believe in what they are doing or at least give their consent to it. This does not imply faith in God, nor respect for the law nor the advice or scruples which may or may not be present. This requires the prior acceptance of and a sort of momentary submission to the rules of the game. A power must be accorded to the words by a higher authority, one of the three which were just cited. And then, even if the parties involved do not believe in it, the act takes place on two levels at once, that of present realities (since the parties concerned must be present) and that of commandments from on high formed by an absence which speaks. The performativity of the statement is lodged above all in the loving devotion of the parties concerned since this is what transforms their openness into commitment. The person who marries will be married by the simple fact of having consented to do so. Words themselves are not performative nor limiting. It suffices to believe that they are during the brief moment when they are spoken, or at least to accept that they are pronounced.

Words are all the more performative in that the devotion with which they are received is abundant. Total performativity belongs to a state of innocence. For my dog, words cannot be anything other than magic and performative. I suppose that he cannot help but perceive a causal relation between the statement "We are going to eat" and the subsequent appearance of his bowl. For him discourse creates something solid and produces objects, provided that he is aware of the content of the expected sign. An interval between the statement or the sign and the presumed effect would disturb him like a disorder of nature. If I tell him, "We are going to eat tomorrow," he remains totally indifferent since the idea of conditional performativity escapes him completely. For children words also create the presences which they imply. Since he knows that there is a Santa Claus

or good fairy or a big bad wolf, a child transforms them into confused presences, badly served by the senses, but which he sometimes is able to perceive. It is because it had been said that Jack would break the bowl that he finally, in fact, did break it.

It is because of words that even the imagination sometimes seems to be performative. It could not be so otherwise since the imagination has no substance of its own if it is not expressed by a discourse, even if this discourse remains endophasic. The primitive imagination distinguishes between the dream and reality in a concrete sense opposed to our own. The dream for such an imagination is truer and more profoundly significant. Examples can be found easily (Caillois). If a primitive dreams that his wife is unfaithful or that his best friend is plotting his death, then this can only be true in an absolute manner. If he reacts to this revelation by killing the presumed guilty party, this can only be possible because he told his dream to himself for the dream cannot reach its performative resolution because of an absence of words.

In Roman law a curse was considered as performative as the law, and in certain cases it constituted sufficient punishment, as curses still do in the popular imagination. Even more, this curse was thought capable of being adapted to new circumstances and, for example, of suspending its effect if the guilty party gave proof of repentance. Modern story-tellers are more timid than ancient lawyers, which does not mean that they do not know the problem. When Don Quixote interprets reality incorrectly, in his own fashion, he never fails to express his visions in discourse, as if this would guarantee his faltering view. The military author of a *pronunciamiento* thinks it enough to multiply proclamations and discourses in order to create his new truths (Ortega y Gasset). He is sometimes more clever than that, for it cannot be said that he himself believes in his truths. He knows that imagination and illusion are, in their fashion, sources of truth. The best magician is not the one who saws a woman in half, but the one who makes me believe that he does. From the point of view of the magician and of the General-President, it makes little difference if I do not really believe. This point of view is disturbingly similar to that of an author.

The relationship between the magician and the author has frequently been pointed out. We have already seen all kinds of *Incantations* and *Charms* and *Spells*, as well as the enchantment of poetry and all so-called technical language, so convenient for saying what one thinks of poetry when one does not really think anything. We are permitted to ask if we can speak seriously of this problem and ask ourselves where we stand, two thousand years after the death of the god Pan.

For us magic has been entirely eliminated, and it is possible that religion will follow since it too has taken such a direction. They were once, however, fully accepted. But secularization tends to become totalitarian, like everything which we undertake. Whatever remains has a fossil value like an archaeological curiosity. No one, during the month of July, ever thinks of Julius Caesar nor of the god which he once was in the votive sense of the word. When we dedicate a monument to peace or freedom or to the memory of some political figure, we never imagine that the mana of the desired object or of the deceased subject will come alive in these solemn stones. When a minister lays a cornerstone, he has no awareness at all of the magical implications or the propitiatory sacrifices which such an act should involve in order to be valid. After having emptied the bottles, we have put them aside for storing our distilled water.

Nevertheless, by repeating such primitive gestures after having stripped them of their initial intentions, perhaps we have not chosen the worst part. It is because of the not yet entirely totalitarian nature of our secularizations that we have been able to inherit certain patterns of behavior which have meaning even if they no longer have a soul; their fossilization gives them an increasingly superfluous quality. The cornerstone is the work of bricklayers and can be laid quite well without the presence of a minister. Can we do without all group ceremonies so easily—oaths, either in their civil version or as mystic vow; national anthems which every nation feels are obligatory and which have become a sort of secular mass; flags, which are like a totem; civil marriage, which is a copy of the religious commitment; social taboos? Modern research has sufficiently illuminated our debt

to the continuity of mystic thought under all the secret or hypocritical forms it has taken to disguise itself. On the day on which we will be fully rid of these wrinkles, it is probable that poetry will appear for what it is—childish, that is *pure*, language. On that day we will have to ask if reason is not the most scientific manner possible for being unreasonable.

In the meanwhile, we have not finished leaving the magic circle, a circle which, as everyone knows, can be drawn or virtual. The more complex the magic act, the better it has resisted eradication. It is to the tenacious survival of the past that we owe the foundation of the literary acts which are identified as the remnants of largely secularized magical thinking. Although they now refuse logical explanations, it is because they have lost their original justification without having found any other. However, they have not lost their ancient empirical effectiveness, and for the moment we cannot conceive of a different literature.

I say literary act because it is a drama. It takes up and repeats in all its details the unfolding of the magical act. Three components have been distinguished in this act: the officiant, the ritual and the incantation (Malinowski). It is easy to identify them with the circumstances of literary discourse: the author or the reader (depending on whether we are talking of the creative act or the renovative act of literary discourse); the ritual, determined by structures, cadences and tropes; and the text which ensures the presence of the incantation. If necessary we can push the analysis even further and arrive at an even more detailed program. Then there would be an obscure aura coming from the awareness of a second presence, produced by the substitution of the lost hierophany; a communion or in-depth participation under the sign of belonging and perhaps of fervor; a liberating shock with the purified return to reality and the new consciousness of having become bearers of a transcendent message. The fundamental implication of the magic operation is the presence, which appears as real, of the solicited object, a presence which cannot be assumed by the participants except thanks to the spell of the words. What is true for magic is equally true for a performative discourse and retains its pertinence for all aspects of literary discourse.

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Henceforth everything will depend on the idea which we have of the magic idea of the double presence. Like a sacramental declaration and like literature, every magic ritual supposes a transcendence which is presently tangible. This is why the incantation is the most important episode of the magic act; the power of the words should produce the second presence which it invokes. It produces it or it reveals it, or suggests it or simply supposes it; I do not know. This has no real importance as long as the participants are not bothered by doubts and that they are agreed that they will accept the reality or the quasi-reality of prestige. In any case it is good to remember that this supposes the presence of a mystery; as mystery, it does not say what it is nor where it exists exactly. However, the magic act must occur as a kind of complicity, an agreement between the visible and the invisible, like essence joined to being, which itself becomes both something different and superfluous. It is for this reason that on the whole it is difficult for us to agree with the possibilities attributed to magic. We do not believe in hierophany, we do not accept the transfiguration which discourse promises and creates all alone. We see in magic as it is still practiced by primitives a ritual void of its content, a fine joke which is played on understanding. For the modern ethnologist there is nothing more annoying, more lacking in mystery and surprise, more devoid of meaning than a magic ceremony (Malinowski). It is as if the presence of Christ in the Eucharist were less monotonous or worse for those who do not believe in it, as if we had not begun by saying that it is necessary first of all to believe. But what can we believe in when the subject is literature? One of two things: either literature has the aura which magic has already lost and so a second presence is revealed in the act of reading; or else, if this second presence is an illusion, then literature possesses the unheard-of art of fooling us every time.

If the second hypothesis is the correct one, then we have been fooled for too long. We have accepted as true things which are not really so. Aristotle spoke of the imitation of nature in extremely ambiguous terms which allow supposing a magic complicity behind intercourse between nature and its imitator, the latter providing the former with I do not know

what kind of new means and more than obscure complementarity. Aristotle perhaps did not know any more than we do, but he lived in an age and world in which the magic depth of reality was sensed in another manner. If he was wrong on this point, we have little chance of finding our way out.

I have not invented this comparison, or confusion, of literature with magic for the sake of my argument. Even without referring to the ambiguities of Aristotle, the fact is constantly present in literary research, implicitly or explicitly. In order to achieve further clarity and also to provide the analysis with an objectivity no doubt become necessary, it suffices to compare the texts. I will cite two authors, each unaware of the other, but both marvelously complementary for describing the same things. One is Mircea Eliade, religious historian (who here is not speaking of literature); the other one is considered to be among the most lucid of critics, Abbé Batteux (who here is not speaking of religion). The meeting of their minds is exemplary, and we cannot attribute it to chance alone.

According to Eliade, "an object becomes sacred inasmuch as it incorporates (*i.e.* it reveals) something other than itself." Batteux says that the object of literature is "to transport traits which are in nature and present them in objects in which they are not natural." By acting in this way, literature produces "an object which is more perfect than nature itself without in any way ceasing to be natural," according to Batteux. And according to Eliade, the unusual nature of certain cultic objects indicates "the presence of something other than what is natural." For the modern scholar studying magic, the presence of a hierophany in a sacred object can, for those to whom it is offered, lead to a "beneficent or adverse" result. For the literary theoretician, art speaks to man of his destiny "either in order to increase it, to perfect it, to preserve it or to diminish it, weaken it or endanger it." It seems clear to me that the thoughts of the two authors are interchangeable; it is highly likely that they are talking of the same things. Separated by two centuries, they consider hierophany and literary discourse as sacred points, inhabited by their natural basis and at the same time by a mysterious transcendence. The comparison is appealing, and the very least that can be said is that it seems to invite us to go even further.

The doubts begin later, and if we do not doubt, the shadows fall. We can accept, if necessary, the fact that the literary act repeats the act of magic and the evolution of the sacred cult. But even without supposing that there is no exaggeration here, does this mean that literature had its origin in magic? Is this a sufficient explanation, a *forma mentis*, a model or a traveling companion? And even prior to that, can literature include transcendence? Research has not illuminated any of these doubts; except erroneously, it never presumed to go any further.

As for us, although we ask ourselves these questions, it is because we have moved too rapidly. The zone of action in which we are now manoeuvring has no landmarks or guard railings so that we must retrace our steps. The only facts which I legitimately possess up to this point, it seems to me, are: the strange coincidence between the postulates and the method of magic and those of the literary act, and the idea of a transcendence or of a hierophany or sacred presence as necessary condition for the magic act, but which I do not identify in literary discourse. These data are not without use.

It is not difficult to explain the similarity of activities making up the two acts in question. They both develop around a nucleus formed of an incantation which is a liturgy (literally: a work meant for the public), whether we intend magic formulas or literary discourse. Liturgy speaks to the God which it seeks, but it is addressed to the people who hear it. The hierophany can only occur if the participants are ready to receive it. The officiant, then, must use performative discourse. Magic and literature use the same specialized variant of linguistic discourse which is wrapped in the same aura; and this suffices to explain their unique parallelism.

This does not certify the appearance of the hierophany in literary discourse. The latter problem arises in a different manner. Perhaps Batteux can help us to resolve it. In light of the proffered evidence, it seems that magic begins in a natural object to include in its materiality the presence of transcendent forces which it evokes, whereas literature has its source in an artistic (and consequently not natural) work which it offers as a tempo-

rary abode to man who is essentially and exclusively concerned. The two activities are parallel and at the same time contrary. Magic offers a real abode to its transcendent guest; in literature the abode is imaginary and consequently beyond reality, transcendent. The guest must be real, and in fact he is. For it is not possible for the double presence, if such there is, to belong to a single nature, being either completely real or completely imaginary.

This conclusion is surprising only at first glance. This should not happen since I knew in advance that the world in which I plunged myself was imaginary. The truth is that I incorrectly calculated my position relative to the work which I thought I was seeing from outside, but this is not the case. I am its prisoner, like the god of the burning bush, the consenting prey. Such tight bonds are created between the text and me that I cannot say if the work is in me or I am in the work. What is certain is that I am its reality and its only guarantee of objectivity. Without me the book would be a land abandoned by the gods, a handful of dust in a burial ground. In order that it live on when I am no longer there to affirm it, someone else must take my place.

Some will say that I am exaggerating my role of reader. It would be difficult not to appear awkward when attempting to explain the mystery. The reader's position relative to the work escapes logical expectations for a simple and at the same time complex reason. Exchanges occur between the imaginary realm of the literary discourse and my own imagination, and I do not dare go any further. The result is that the work, which is imaginary, speaks of my realities; and considering myself as real, I have no other access to these imaginary realities than my real imagination. I can no longer agree with Boileau when I begin to conceive clearly that things are not clear in themselves.

We already knew that literature is so impalpable that ultimately it is nothing. "It is not sound as in music, nor color as in painting;" it only exists in the consciousness "in a state of purely spiritual representation or intuition" (Hegel). The work is a group of images which become clear without loss to the text, an awareness and a memory which is as devoid of materiality as any other mental activity. But it is not a god, it is the

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imagined abode where men think themselves gods. This abode is nothing if the god is not present. It is not enough that the god be imagined; Turpin is not the most sure witness of Roland. Although it is true that the poem is a memory of images, it only exists through the support of that memory which is the only one which can attest to it. A record is not music if it has not been rescued from its silence; the sound waves which envelop us all around are lost to us, as would be an Etruscan poem if such were to be found. Poetry needs me to exist, like the hierophany itself. The reader is the sensitivity responsible for the destiny of the poem and gives it its chance, at the same time that he devours it and assimilates it, as one savored the bodies of the gods in the ancient mysteries. It is for this reason that poets do not love their future readers; Baudelaire insults them and Nietzsche hates them.

The reader cannot look at the text from outside since it is not an object. The relation established between them is not a contact or a contiguity; it devours the work from the inside. It enters into irreality like the god seeking shelter in the rock. In this way the literary text acquires this double presence which is characteristic of every magic act. It is in this sense that each reader is the manna of the discourse which he brings to life, the fertility god and one of the principles of the poem. It is not the poet but the consciousness which reaffirms the unreal and gives it its consistency, and it benefits from this like the gods benefit from incense. It is nourished by it, and this nourishment becomes an inseparable part of its destiny. Reading is the only form of total possession, always renewable, and which can only be lost by an intentional act. Memories of the past do not discriminate against memories from reading; one is not more "real" than the other. These memories belong to me in the same way as my other experiences, even better perhaps, for they are in me.

The miracle is there in its entirety. The work is in me at the same time as I am in the work. The double presence works its effect, and magic is not an empty word. The principle of identity no longer having a role in literature, as everywhere where the unreal is involved, two contradictory universes possess and penetrate one another simultaneously, one containing the other which contains it. Faith alone can save, in literature also. The

truth exists when we *believe* it is true. Flaubert had that faith since he said that he believed in the existence of Don Quixote as much as in that of Julius Caesar. I believe that we all have that faith.

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