

LANGUAGE TO INFINITY*

Writing so as not to die, as Maurice Blanchot said, or perhaps even speaking so as not to die, is a task undoubtedly as old as the word. The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story. We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it. It is quite likely, as Homer has said, that the gods send disasters to men so that they can tell of them, and that in this possibility speech finds its infinite resourcefulness; it is quite likely that the approach of death—its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory—hollows out in the present and in existence the void toward which and from which we speak. But the *Odyssey*, which affirms this gift of language in death, tells the inverted story of how Ulysses returns home: it repeats, each time death threatened him and in order to ward off its dangers, exactly how (by what wiles and intrigues) he had succeeded in maintaining this imminence that returns again the moment he begins to speak, in the form of a menacing gesture or a new danger. And when, as a stranger among the Phaeacians, he hears in another's voice the tale, already a thousand years old, of his own history, it is as if he were listening to his own death: he covers his face and cries, in the gesture of a woman to whom the dead body of a hero is brought after a battle. Against this speech which announces his death and arises from deep within the new *Odyssey* as from an older

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time, Ulysses must sing the song of his identity and tell of his misfortunes to escape the fate presented to him by a language before language. And he pursues this fictive speech, confirming and dissipating its powers at the same time, into this space, which borders death but is also poised against it, where the story locates its natural domain. The gods send disasters to mortals so that they can tell of them, but men speak of them so that misfortunes will never be fully realized, so that their fulfillment will be averted in the distance of words, at the place where they will be stilled in the negation of their nature. Boundless misfortune, the resounding gift of the gods, marks the point where language begins; but the limit of death opens before language, or rather within language, an infinite space. Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth, but it also starts again, tells of itself, discovers the story of the story and the possibility that this interpenetration might never end. Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power—that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits. From the depths of the mirror where it sets out to arrive anew at the point where it started (at death), but so as finally to escape death, another language can be heard—the image of actual language, but as a minuscule, interior, and virtual model; it is the song of the bard who had already sung of Ulysses before the *Odyssey* and before Ulysses himself (since Ulysses hears the song), but who will also sing of him endlessly after his death (since, for the bard, Ulysses is already as good as dead); and Ulysses, who is alive, receives this song as a wife receives her slain husband.

Perhaps there exists in speech an essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language. Perhaps the figure of a mirror to infinity erected against the black wall of death is fundamental for any language from the moment it determines to leave a trace of its passage. Not only since the invention of writing has language pretended to pursue itself to infinity; but neither is it because of its fear of death that it decided one day to assume a body in the form of visible and permanent signs. Rather, somewhat before the invention of writing, a change had to occur to open the space in which writing could flow and establish itself, a change, symbolized for us in its most original figuration by Homer, that forms one of the most decisive ontological events of language: its mirrored reflection upon death

and the construction, from this reflection, of a virtual space where speech discovers the endless resourcefulness of its own image, and where it can represent itself as already existing behind itself, already active beyond itself, to infinity. The possibility of a work of language finds its original fold in this duplication. In this sense, death is undoubtedly the most essential of the accidents of language (its limit and its center): from the day that men began to speak toward death and against it, in order to grasp and imprison it, something was born, a murmuring that repeats, recounts, and redoubles itself endlessly, has undergone an uncanny process of amplification and thickening, in which our language is today lodged and hidden.

(A hypothesis that is hardly indispensable: alphabetical writing is already, in itself, a form of duplication, since it represents not the signified but the phonetic elements by which it is signified; the ideogram, on the other hand, directly represents the signified, independently from a phonetic system, which is another mode of representation. Writing, in Western culture, automatically dictates that we place ourselves in the virtual space of self-representation and reduplication; since writing refers not to a thing but to speech, a work of language only advances more deeply into the intangible density of the mirror, calls forth the double of this already-doubled writing, discovers in this way a possible and impossible infinity, ceaselessly strives after speech, maintains it beyond the death that condemns it, and frees a murmuring stream. This presence of repeated speech in writing undeniably gives to what we call a work of language an ontological status unknown in those cultures where the act of writing designates the thing itself, in its proper and visible body, stubbornly inaccessible to time.)

Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of a condemned writer to whom God grants, at the precise instant of his execution, another year of life to complete the work he had begun.¹ Suspended between life and death, this work is a drama where everything is necessarily repeated: the end (as yet unfinished) taking up word for word the (already-written) beginning, but in such a way as to show the main character, whom we know and who has spoken since the first scenes, to be not himself but an impostor. And during this impending death, during the year that passes while a drop of rain streaks the condemned man's cheek, as the smoke of his last cigarette disappears, Hladik writes—but with words that no one will be able to read, not even God—the

great, invisible labyrinth of repetition, of language that divides itself and becomes its own mirror. When the last epithet is found (also the first since the drama begins again), the volley of rifle fire, released less than a second before, strikes his silence at its heart.

I wonder if it is not possible to construct or, at the very least, to outline from a distance an ontology of literature beginning from these phenomena of self-representation in language; such figures, which seemingly belong to the level of guile or entertainment, conceal, that is, betray the relationship that language establishes with death—with this limit to which language addresses itself and against which it is poised. It would be necessary to begin with a general analysis of all the forms of reduplication of language to be found in Western literature. These forms, there is no reason to doubt, are limited in number, and it should be possible to list them in their entirety. Their often-extreme discretion, the fact that they are occasionally hidden and surface through what seems chance or inadvertance, should not deceive us; or, rather, we must recognize in them the very power of illusion, the possibility for language (a single stringed instrument) to stand upright as a work. The reduplication of language, even if it is concealed, constitutes its being as a work, and the signs that might appear from this must be read as ontological indications.

These signs are often imperceptible, bordering on the futile. They manage to present themselves as faults—slight imperfections at the surface of a work: we might say that they serve as an involuntary opening to the inexhaustible depths from which they come to us. I am reminded of an episode in *The Nun* where Suzanne explains the history of a letter to a correspondent (its composition, hiding place, attempted theft, and finally its custody by a friend who was able to return it)—of precisely this letter in which she explains to her correspondent, and so on.² Proof, to be sure, that Diderot was distracted, but, more important, a sign that language is speaking of itself, that the letter is not the letter, but the language that doubles it within the same system of reality (because they speak at the same time, use the same words, and identically share the same body; language is the letter's flesh and blood); and yet, language is also absent, but not as a result of the sovereignty we ascribe to a writer; rather, it renders itself absent by crossing the virtual space where language is made into an image of itself and transgresses the limit of death through its reduplication in a

mirror. Diderot's "blunder" is not the result of his eagerness to intervene, but is due to the opening of language to its system of self-representation: the letter in *The Nun* is only an analogue of a letter, resembling it in every detail with the exception of being its imperceptibly displaced double (this displacement made visible only because of a tear in the fabric of language). In this lapsus (in the exact sense of the word), we find a figure which is quite similar to—but exactly the inverse of—that found in *The Thousand and One Nights*, where an episode recounted by Scheherazade tells why she was obliged for a thousand and one nights, and so on. In this context, the mirrored structure is explicitly given: at its center, the work holds out a mirror ("psyche": a fictive space, a real soul) where it appears like a miniature of itself and preceding itself, since it tells its own story as one among the many wonders of the past, among so many other nights. And in this privileged night, so much like the others, a space is opened that seems to be that in which it merely forms an insignificant aberration, and it reveals the same stars in the same sky. We could say that there is one night too many, that a thousand would have been enough; we could say, inversely, that a letter is missing in *The Nun* (the one that should tell the history of the letter so that it would no longer be required to tell of its own adventure). It seems clear, in any event, that in the same dimension there exists, from the one, a missing day and, from the other, one night too many—the fatal space in which language speaks of itself.

It is possible that in every work language is superimposed upon itself in a secret verticality; where the double is exactly the same as the thin space between—the narrow, black line that no perception can divulge except in those fortuitous and deliberately confusing moments when the figure of Scheherazade surrounds itself with fog, retreats to the origins of time, and arises infinitely reduced at the center of a brilliant, profound, and virtual disc. A work of language is the body of language crossed by death in order to open this infinite space where doubles reverberate. And the forms of this superimposition, essential to the construction of any work, can undoubtedly only be deciphered in these adjacent, fragile, and slightly monstrous figures where a division into two signals itself; their exact listing and classification, the establishment of the laws that govern their functioning or transformations, could well lead to a formal ontology of literature.

It seems to me that a change was produced in the relationship of language to its indefinite repetition at the end of the eighteenth century—nearly coinciding with the moment in which works of language became what they are now for us, that is, literature. This is the time (or very nearly so) when Hölderlin became aware, to the point of blindness, that he could only speak in the space marked by the disappearance of the gods, and that language could only depend on its own power to keep death at a distance. Thus, an opening was traced on the horizon toward which our speech has ceaselessly advanced.

For a long time—from the advent of the Homeric gods to the remoteness of the divine in the fragment of *Empedocles*—speaking so as not to die had a meaning now alien to us. To speak of heroes or as a hero, to desire to construct something like a work, to speak so that others speak of it to infinity, to speak for “glory,” was indeed to move toward or against this death maintained by language; to speak as a sacred orator warning of death, to threaten men with this end beyond any possible glory, was also to disarm death and promise immortality. In other words, every work was intended to be completed, to still itself in a silence where the infinite Word reestablished its supremacy. Within a work, language protected itself against death through this invisible speech, this speech before and after any possible time from which it made itself into its self-enclosed reflection. The mirror to infinity, to which every language gives birth once it erects itself vertically against death, was not displayed without an evasion: the work placed the infinite outside of itself—a real and majestic infinity in which it became a virtual and circular mirror, completed in a beautifully closed form.

Writing, in our day, has moved infinitely closer to its source, to this disquieting sound which announces from the depths of language—once we attend to it—the source against which we seek refuge and toward which we address ourselves. Like Franz Kafka’s beast, language now listens from the bottom of its burrow to this inevitable and growing noise.⁵ To defend itself it must follow its movements, become its loyal enemy, and allow nothing to stand between them except the contradictory thinness of a transparent and unbreakable partition. We must ceaselessly speak, for as long and as loudly as this indefinite and deafening noise—longer and more loudly so that in mixing our voices with it we might succeed—if not in silencing and mastering it—in

modulating its futility into the endless murmuring we call literature. From this moment, a work whose only meaning resides in its being a self-enclosed expression of its glory is no longer possible.

The date of this transformation is roughly indicated by the simultaneous appearance at the end of the eighteenth century of the works of Sade and the tales of terror. It is not their common predilection for cruelty which concerns us here; nor is it the discovery of the link between literature and evil, but something more obscure and paradoxical at first sight. These languages which are constantly drawn out of themselves by the overwhelming, the unspeakable, by thrills, stupefaction, ecstasy, dumbness, pure violence, wordless gestures, and are calculated with the greatest economy and precision to produce effects (so that they make themselves as transparent as possible at this limit of language toward which they hurry, erasing themselves in their writing for the exclusive sovereignty of what they wish to say and lies outside of words)—these languages very strangely represent themselves in a slow, meticulous, and infinitely extended ceremony. These simple languages, which name and make one see, are curiously double.

Undoubtedly, it would still take a long time to understand the language of Sade as it exists for us today: I am not referring to the possible meaning of this prisoner's purpose in endlessly writing books that could not be read (somewhat on the order of Borges's character who boundlessly extends the second of his death through the language of a repetition addressed to no one); but to the nature of these words in the present and to the existence in which they prolong their life to our day. This language's claim to tell all is not simply that of breaking prohibitions but of seeking the limits of the possible; the design, in a systematically transformed network, of all the branchings, insertions, and overlappings that are deduced from the human crystal in order to give birth to great, sparkling, mobile, and infinitely extendable configurations; the lengthy passage through the underground of nature to the double lightning flash of the spirit (the first, derisive and dramatic, which blasts Justine, and the second, invisible and absolutely slow, which—in the absence of a charnel house—causes Juliette to disappear into a kind of eternity asymptotic to death)—these elements designate the project of subjecting every possible language, every future language, to the actual sovereignty of this

unique Discourse which no one, perhaps, will be able to hear. Through so many bodies consummated in their actual existence, this Saturnine language devours all eventual words, all those words which have yet to be born. And if each scene in its visible aspect is doubled by a demonstration that repeats it and gives it value as a universal element, it is because what is being consumed in this second discourse, and upon another mode, is not all future languages but every language that has been effectively pronounced: everything, before Sade and in his time, that could have been thought, said, practiced, desired, honored, flouted, or condemned in relation to man, God, the soul, the body, sex, nature, priests, or women finds itself meticulously repeated (from this arise the interminable enumerations on the historical or ethnographic level, which do not support Sade's reasoning but delineate the space where his reason functions)—thus, repeated, combined, dissociated, reversed, and reversed once again, not in view of a dialectical reward but toward a radical exhaustion. Saint-Fond's wonderful negative cosmology, the punishment that reduces it to silence, Clairville thrown into a volcano, the wordless apotheosis of Juliette are moments that register the calcination of every language. Sade's impossible book stands in the place of every book—of all these books it makes impossible from the beginning to the end of time. Under this obvious pastiche of all the philosophies and stories of the eighteenth century, beneath this immense double that is not without analogy to *Don Quixote*, the totality of language finds itself sterilized by the single and identical movement of two inseparable figures: the strict, inverted repetition of what has already been said and the simple naming of that which lies at the limit of what we can say.

The precise object of "sadism" is not the other, neither his body, nor his sovereignty: it is everything that might have been said. Furthermore and still somewhat at a distance, it is the mute circle where language deploys itself: to a world of captive readers, Sade, the captive, denies the possibility of reading. This is done so effectively that if we asked to whom the works of Sade were addressed (and address themselves today), there is only one answer: no one. The works of Sade inhabit a strange limit, which they nevertheless persist in transgressing—or, rather, which they transgress because of the fact that they speak: they deny themselves the space of their language—but by

confiscating it in a gesture of repetitive appropriation; and they evade not only their meaning (a meaning constructed at every turn) but their possible being; the indecipherable play of ambiguity within them is nothing but the serious sign of this conflict which forces them to be the double of every language (which, in their repetition, they set to fire) and of their own absence (which they constantly manifest). These works could and should, in a strict sense, continue without interruption, in a murmuring that has no other ontological status than that of a similar conflict.

In spite of appearances, the simplicity of the novels of terror achieves much the same ends. They were meant to be read and were in effect: *Coelina or The Child of Mystery* sold 1.2 million copies from its publication in 1798 to the Restoration.⁴ This means that every person who knew how to read, and had read at least one book in his life, had read *Coelina*. It was the Book – an absolute text whose readership exactly corresponded to the total domain of possible readers. It was a book without a future, without a fringe exposed to deaf ears, since almost instantaneously and in a single movement it was able to achieve its goal. Historical conditions were necessary to foster this new phenomenon (as far as I know, it has never been repeated). It was especially necessary that the book possess an exact functional efficiency and that it coincide, without any screening or alteration, without dividing itself into two, with its objective, which was very simply to be read. But novels of this type were not meant to be read at the level of their writing or in the specific dimensions of their language; they wished to be read for the things they recounted, for this emotion, fear, horror, or pity that words were charged to communicate, but only through their pure and simple transparency. Language should acquire the thinness and absolute seriousness of the story; in making itself as gray as possible, it was required to transmit an event to its docile and terrorized reader, to be nothing but the neutral element of pathos. That is to say, it never offered itself in its own right; there was no mirror, wedged into the thickness of its discourse which might open the unlimited space of its own image. Rather, it erased itself between the things it said and the person to whom it spoke, accepting with absolute seriousness and according to the principle of strict economy its role as horizontal language, its role of communication.

Yet these novels of terror are accompanied by an ironic movement that doubles and divides them, which is not the result of historical repercussions or an effect of tedium. In a phenomenon quite rare in the history of literary language, satire in this instance is exactly contemporaneous with the situation it parodies.⁵ It is as if two twin and complementary languages were born at once from the same central source: one existing entirely in its naïveté, the other within parody; one existing solely for the reader's eyes, the other moving from the reader's simpleminded fascination to the easy tricks of the writer. But in actuality, these two languages are more than simply contemporaneous; they lie within each other, share the same dwelling, constantly intertwine, forming a single verbal network and, as it were, a forked language that turns against itself from within, destroying itself in its own body, poisonous in its very density.

The native thinness of the story is perhaps firmly attached to a secret annihilation, to an internal struggle that is the very law of its development, proliferation, and inexhaustible flora. This "too-muchness" functions somewhat like the excess in Sade, but the latter proceeds to the simple act of naming and to the recovery of all language, while the former relies on two different figures. The first is an ornamental superabundance, where nothing is shown without the explicit, simultaneous, and contradictory indication of all its attributes at once: it is not a weapon that shows itself under a word and cuts through it but an inoffensive and complete panoply (let us call this figure, after an often repeated episode, the effect of the "bloody skeleton": the presence of death is manifested by the whiteness of the rattling bones and, at the same time, on this smooth skeleton, by the dark and contradictory streaks of blood). The second figure is that of a "wavelike succession to infinity": each episode must follow the preceding one in keeping with the simple but absolutely essential law of increment. It is necessary to approach always closer to the moment when language will reveal its absolute power, by giving birth, through each of its feeble words, to terror; but this is the moment in which language inevitably becomes impotent, when its breath is cut short, when it should still itself without even saying that it stops speaking. Language must push back to infinity this limit it bears with itself, which indicates, at once, its kingdom and its limit. Thus, in each novel, an exponential series of endless episodes; and then, beyond this, an endless series of novels. The language of terror is dedicated to

an endless expense, even though it only seeks to achieve a single effect. It drives itself out of any possible resting place.

Sade and the novels of terror introduce an essential imbalance within works of language: they force them of necessity to be always excessive and deficient. Excessive because language can no longer avoid multiplying itself—as if struck from within by a disease of proliferation; it is always beyond the limit in relation to itself; it only speaks as a supplement starting from a displacement such that the language from which it separates itself and which it recovers is the one that appears useless and excessive, and deserves to be expunged; but, as a result of the same shift, it sheds in turn all ontological weight; it is at this point excessive and of so little density that it is fated to extend itself to infinity without ever acquiring the weight that might immobilize it. But does this not also imply that it suffers a deficiency, or, rather, that it is struck by the wound of the double? That it challenges language to reproduce it in the virtual space (in the real transgression) of the mirror, and to create a new mirror in the first, and again another, and always to infinity? The actual infinity of illusion which forms, in its vanity, the thickness of a work—that absence in the interior from which the work paradoxically erects itself.

Perhaps what we should rigorously define as “literature” came into existence at precisely the moment, at the end of the eighteenth century, when a language appeared that appropriates and consumes all other languages in its lightning flash, giving birth to an obscure but dominant figure where death, the mirror and the double, and the wavelike succession of words to infinity enact their roles.

In “The Library of Babel,” everything that can possibly be said has already been said:⁶ it contains all conceived and imagined languages, and even those which might be conceived or imagined; everything has been pronounced, even those things without meaning, so that the odds of discovering even the smallest formal coherence are extremely slight, as witnessed by the persevering search of those who have never been granted this dispensation. And yet standing above all these words is the rigorous and sovereign language that recovers them, tells their story, and is actually responsible for their birth: a language that is itself poised against death, because it is at the moment of falling into the shaft of an infinite Hexagon that the most lucid (and consequently the last) of the librarians reveals that even the in-

finitude of language multiplies itself to infinity, repeating itself without end in the divided figures of the Same.

This configuration is exactly the reverse of that found in classical rhetoric. Rhetoric did not enunciate the laws or forms of a language; it established the relationship between two forms of speech: the first, mute, indecipherable, fully present to itself, and absolute; the other, garrulous, had only to voice this first speech according to forms, operations, and conjunctions whose space measured its distance from the first and inaudible text. For finite creatures and for men who would die, rhetoric ceaselessly repeated the speech of the Infinite that would never come to an end. Every figure of rhetoric betrayed a distance in its own space, but in signaling the first speech it lent the provisional density of a revelation to the second: it showed. The space of language today is not defined by rhetoric, but by the Library—by the ranging to infinity of fragmentary languages, substituting for the double chain of Rhetoric the simple, continuous, and monotonous line of language left to its own devices, a language fated to be infinite because it can no longer support itself upon the speech of infinity. But within itself, it finds the possibility of its own division, of its own repetition, the power to create a vertical system of mirrors, self-images, analogies. A language that repeats no other speech, no other Promise, but postpones death indefinitely by ceaselessly opening a space where it is always the analogue of itself.

Libraries are the enchanted domain of two major difficulties. They have been resolved, we know, by mathematicians and tyrants (but perhaps not altogether). There is a dilemma: either all these books are already contained within the Word [*la Parole*] and they must be burned, or they are contradictory and, again, they must be burned. Rhetoric is a means of momentarily postponing the burning of libraries (but it holds out this promise for the near future, that is, for the end of time). And thus the paradox: If we make a book that tells of all the others, would it or would it not be a book itself? Must it tell its own story as if it were a book among others? And if it does not tell its story, what could it possibly be, since its objective was to be a book? Why should it omit its own story, since it is required to speak of every book? Literature begins when this paradox is substituted for the dilemma; when the book is no longer the space where speech adopts a form (forms of style, forms of rhetoric, forms of language) but the site where books are all recaptured and consumed: a site that is nowhere,

since it gathers all the books of the past in this impossible “volume” whose murmuring will be shelved among so many others—after all the others, before all the others.

NOTES

- 1 “The Secret Miracle,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. Donald A. Yates and others (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 88–94.
- 2 Denis Diderot, *La Religieuse* [1796] (Paris: Colin, 1961) [*The Nun*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Folio Society, 1922)].
- 3 Franz Kafka, “The Burrow,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum M. Glazer (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 325–59.
- 4 René-Charles Guibert de Piérécourt, *Coelina ou L’Enfant du Mystère* (Paris: Le Prieur, 1798), 3 vols.
- 5 A text such as Bellin de Labordière’s *Une Nuit Anglaise* [*An English Night*] was meant to have the same relation to tales of terror as *Don Quixote* had to chivalric romances; but it is their exact contemporary.
- 6 Borges, “The Library of Babel,” in *Labyrinths*, pp. 51–58.