

## **Limiting Literature On Paradoxes of Literary Modernity**

Jean Bessière

### **I. Limitless Literature**

**C**ontemporary criticism has been dedicated to defining literature as limitless, as much within the terms of its characterization as within the terms of its power of representation and of deconstruction. This characterization supposes that literature is in a situation of intelligibility with regards to any other entity – from language to the world itself and to all the different states and all the different versions, which this world gives to itself. Contemporary criticism has also been dedicated to estimating this lack of limits irrelevant, by indicating that literature can only exist as intelligibility of itself. To recognize this lack of limit is doubtless not the constant intention of 20th century literature. The observation that literature is concerned only with its own intelligibility is, consequently, an observation, which can only apply to part of 20th century literature. It is thus necessary to recognize that this limitless literature may not exist without a literature, which knows its limits, the limits of its power to represent, to deconstruct, to create implicit entities, which are designated by these acts of representation and of deconstruction. To thus suggest the limits which literature recognizes to itself, and which are, in fact, cognitive limits, necessitates going back to the

hypothesis of a limitless literature, considering the paradoxes which make up its condition and showing how these paradoxes, when their consequences are perceived, lead to a third paradox – from which the limits of literature, particularly contemporary literature, may be conceived. These limits should not be defined merely as the reversal of the lack of limits, which literature has chosen as its main characteristic.

The two paradoxes, which are the conditions of literature, which defines itself as limitless, may be expressed in the following manner. *With regards to the first paradox*: literary Modernity invents its own present at the same time as it creates a work of literature, and thus, never stops inventing the past and simultaneously removing its terms of reference. *With regards to the second paradox*: literary Modernity, as it creates a work of literature and this paradoxical design of the past, considers itself as being the understanding of all time, of all people. This understanding defines the relevance of the work, but it consequently subordinates the work to the design of the concordance of the various symbolical orders, to the recognition of its necessity, to the recognition of any other necessity, and to the understanding of that other necessity. We know that the setting out of such a concordance is the limit that Mallarmé gives to his poetical enterprise.

There exists a form of knowledge of the consequences of these two paradoxes. As for the first paradox, the literary work is aligned in a face-to-face confrontation with all other time, with all other history, and exists in itself only through and within this face-to-face confrontation. Narrative poetry exemplifies this confrontation — it suffices to refer to Pound's *Cantos*. As for the second paradox, the literary work leads to the contradiction of a symbolic system which is both that of the work and that of all other symbolic systems: this is why the work may thus be considered as its own fictional

expansion (Borges), or as the lack of understanding of its own symbolic system, in that it can not even decipher its own arguments (Kafka).

The knowledge of these consequences does not necessarily lead to the writing or the reading of a type of literature which, as it has often been said, may be considered as a literature of its own, reduced to its own existence, which discovers, within its own internal design, the games and the carrying out of the first paradox: it suffices, in this case, to recall what is known as metafiction. The same is true for a type of literature, which, as deconstruction suggests, never ceases to suppose that writing becomes a sort of general written expression, and that it may thus only exist as the constant critique of the basic elements of the two paradoxes. Outside these types of literature, literature which is aware of the consequences of the two paradoxes acts on an understanding paradoxical in itself, by showing the limits of its own understanding, becoming an explicit form of questioning, not in order to remain within the limits of questioning, but in order to demonstrate, firstly, that this questioning is the means, within a game of inferences, to the understanding of all things and of all people, and that secondly, the creating of literary works exists through this game of inferences.

## II. Two Paradoxes

*About the first paradox.* We may follow, as regards literary criticism of the last forty years, the games of a type of terminology which has played on tradition and novelty, on Modernity and all its variations, which imply that which is not modern, on the Modern and the Postmodern, and on the Postmodern which is merely a way of seeing the old within the new, or of putting the old into the new, if we go by the writer's perspective. We may follow that which these dualities correspond to within the design of

literary history and of the ideological and cognitive paradigms which underlie this design. However, there is an invariable element which becomes visible with regards to these notions and to their dualities: the paradox of that which is modern, which is merely the paradox of the new, is characterized by a contradiction. To imply the new means making the past into a series of referential data, and making the past old; it consequently means showing that these referential data are being ceaselessly reinvented and, , become empty references.

Before being tempted to describe the Modern as a specific universe, before indicating that such a universe is included within the definition of the Modern, and that this universe may give rise to or give the right to exist to other specific universes according to the paradox of the relationship to the past, we must specify, on the one hand, that there is an invention of the past in the moment at which one recognizes the present, and on the other hand, that the present exists only through the right to exist, which one gives to the past.. The ambivalence of the recognition of the past may be expressed thusly: if this recognition is simultaneously the invention of the past, it makes this act of invention into that which is both a reference and a lack of reference, because the past exists through the invention of the present. The ambivalence of the invention of the present may be expressed thusly: if the present cannot be dissociated from the recognition of the past, it is also just as uncertain as the reference to the past, which may be a lack of reference.

The various conceptions of Modernity are based on these ambivalence and contradiction, from which, during the 19th century, all the observations concerning melancholy stem, and during the 20th century, all that is critical with regards to Modern thought. Because of these ambivalence and contradiction, literary Modernity never ceases to assert the present and the past, and to withdraw the "literality" of the reference to the present and to the

past, whilst, at the same time, the assertion of the present and of the past is preserved. Withdrawing “literality” means that the present and the past are designated for their own sake, and that they may nevertheless not be interpreted in themselves, but only according to the common field which they constitute in the literary work.

Within this perspective of the paradoxical treatment of the invention of the present and of the recognition of the past, and of their reciprocal construction, according to the form of pertinence which would only be visible within this framework of reciprocity, we may interpret Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*, Pound’s *Cantos* and, closer to us in time, Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra* and *Cristóbal nonato*. Within the same perspective, Gertrude Stein’s demonstration in *The Wars I have seen* is paradigmatic. The Wars I have seen is merely a continuous meditation on the contemporary. The contemporary is seen, because it is the definition of its own archeology, as that which gives the past the right to exist: the past is both the figure of this contemporaneity and that of the history.

These few authors’ names are emblematic ones. However, they allow us to specify the status of the contemporary literary creation insofar as it is related to the reference to the past and to the present, which literary works consider to be reciprocal. When Gertrude Stein entertains the notions of the Romantic and the Modern, and reverses them chronologically – the present being the Romantic, and the Modern the past –, when she relates this chronological reversal to the present, to her own present, to the present of war, of the First World War, of the Civil War in the United States, she knows that she is taking away the reality of the past and the present, and perhaps the reality of war. She suggests, however, that she thus gives form to the only likelihood that may be expressed concerning our past, our present, and even our works of literature, because this reversal gives form to the

common field of time and of history – a common field which may only be shown by works of literature. The vast archeology of the new world which Carlos Fuentes pictures in *Terra Nostra* and in *Cristóbal nonato* merges with the image of the equality of time.

This equality, even if it is related to an explicit symbolic system which can be interpreted as the indication of an history which follows the order of causality, makes literary works into the evocation of all time, and makes all time into a point of convergence, a present without dates. Through this process, the narrative is merely the likelihood of all time and the eradication of the “literality” of all time. The same types of equivocation have been expressed with regards to the *Cantos* – the history of the *Cantos* is merely the present of the series of poems –, and to *A la recherche du temps perdu* – the novel sets out a search for the past whose mnemonic present is the condition for the narrative creation. The right to exist which is recognized with regard to the present is the foundation for the right to exist recognized with regard to the past. Past and present are constituted simultaneously, with the risk that one or the other of them become merely dependent upon this act of constitution.

These remarks apply to poetry. We may recall Octavio Paz’s expression, “Poetry of convergence”, which must be interpreted as a criticism of the experience of time and of history, such as Modernity invents it, and as a denial of the tradition of newness, which characterized the art and the literature of the 20th century. This expression characterizes modern and contemporary poetry as a *now without dates*. That means that poetry is strictly historical and strictly temporal, and is nevertheless eradicates of the literal meaning of the references to the past and to history. The *now without dates* turn 20th century poetry into poetry of brevity, and thus into poetry which cannot develop its own temporality. This poetry nevertheless exists through this temporal and historical

paradox, and we do not know if it solves the paradox, or if reiterates it: all at the same time, it gives the past and the present the right to exist, and makes the past into a form of otherness. This ambivalence forbids us to characterize poetry as a definite temporal symbol, but obliges us to recognize it as being that which is caught between the past and the present and which brings them into existence, without being able to create its own temporal space.

To keep the present and the past — based on the present, based on the constitution of the present — within the realm of the present's newness, is to come to Arthur Danto's lapidary conclusion (Danto 1997: Introduction): the contemporary shares a family likeness with the ancient. We must conclude from this that the contemporary and the ancient are thus without specificity, and that they recognize themselves in one another, and through one another, as the work of art recognizes itself in the everyday object. Linking reflection on the modern and the ancient to reflection on the *ready-made* is thus no arbitrary gesture. It suffices to observe that making the *ready-made* into a work of art is the result of an interpretation of the object under consideration, which is a constitutive interpretation. In this hypothesis, we recognize the work of art through a given everyday object precisely because that object is above all that which removes art's system of references, as the constitutive interpretation removes the system of references of the everyday object. This double movement of infidelity towards art and towards the everyday object leads, in a precisely paradoxical manner, when the constitutive interpretation is finished, to art and to the everyday object. The family likeness, which is recognized with regards to the present and to the ancient, takes part in a movement of reflection, in a constitutive interpretation of the present, which have the same underlying logic. This is why the history of art may only be



expressed according to such a constitutive interpretation, which sets out the chronology and the evolution of art, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, observes that the present of art and the art of the present belong to the same date, to our date, and that they exist nevertheless together with all the other arts: all art is recognized as a given art and as a point of convergence. Thus, reflecting upon present art and upon past art, and upon the *ready-made*, is the same as saying that art is above all an idea, as the past and the present are ideas, and that the illustrations of these ideas are interchangeable, and perhaps ordinary, without properties which explicitly relate them to this idea of art, to this idea of the present, to this idea of the past.

In its extremity, Arthur Danto's thought process is instructive. It shows that the paradox of the present and of the past is ultimately nothing but a nominalist paradox, as the characterization of the ordinary object as a work of art is a nominalist exercise. The hypothesis of the constitutive interpretation of the work of art, and the hypothesis relative to the history of art originate in the same movement as that which constitutes the game of the old and the new, of the past and the present. This game of the old and the new is thus paradoxical in the right to exist that it gives to the past, and which is indissolubly the removal of references of the past and of the present. The temporal and historical paradox, which would give rise to the exercise of our present, is inseparable from a manner of legal exercise — that which gives the right to exist to the present and, thus, to the past, and gives the right to exist to the everyday object and, thus, to the work of art. This exercise is the recognition of these entities, and, simultaneously, the removal of any meaning of their own.

Remarkably, within the perspective of the paradoxical treatment of the invention of the present and of the recognition of the past, the act of reading can be defined as an elision of the present and as an answer to



the paradox. Carlos Fuentes formulates the link of this elision with the sense of the past and of the future, which the reader appropriates:

And like Janus, the reader of novels has two faces. One looks towards the future, the other towards the past. Obviously, the reader looks towards the future. The material of the novel and that which remains unfinished, the quest for a new world being created. But through the novel, the reader also embodies the past; he or she is invited to discover the novelty of the past. (C. Fuentes 1993: 54)

The reader's present is not expressed; it is, however, the time of this invention of the past as well as that of the future. Not to express the present is an effort to remove the ambiguity of the distinction of the past and of the present, and to relate the question of the relevance of reading to a past, which is not so much an invented reference as a new reference. The paradoxical treatment of the invention of the present and of the recognition of the past equates to giving vent to a specific temporal phenomenology of reading, which is the means to restore a sense of history.

*About the second paradox.* The correspondence of the symbolic system of the literary work to all other symbolic systems equates to situating the literary work's symbolic principle outside of it – that does not exclude the fact that the work may express its own symbolic power. Realism, particularly that form of Realism which sees itself as a sort of totality, the type of poetry such as that of the *Cantos*, the entire development of contemporary science fiction exemplify this displacement. The recognition of these two possibilities is linked to the recognition of the present and of the past, which is thus recognition of the symbolic status of the past and of the symbolic status of the present, and of the hypothesis of their continuum, insofar as the past and the present enter into a game of reciprocal invention. In this hypothesis, writing is defined either as a form of hyper-writing, which would follow from the concordance of the symbolic

orders of the past and of the present, or as its own movement, which thus becomes a movement of fiction, and which is the free composition of the symbolic orders of the present and of the past. When we become attached, as was Paul de Man, to repeating the impossibility of a symbolic literature, we imply this paradox, even if we do not express it.

This second paradox may be considered as being symmetrical to the first paradox. According to the first paradox, the literary work, when it institutes its own present, simultaneously institutes the past and removes the references of the past. According to the second paradox, the symbolic system of literature is constituted only in the presence of another symbolic system: literature is a right to exist through itself, and a right to exist through its Other. But the link of these two rights to existence is doubtless but the vanity of literature insofar as the assimilation of the other symbolic system is an obstacle to the development of literature — it may not be this sole and other symbolic system. Arthur Danto's observations on the Postmodern and on the ancient and on the end of the history of art, on the *ready-made*, may be reinterpreted in this perspective. The link of the two symbolic systems, particularly in an historical and temporal perspective, is not dissociable from the family likeness which the present and the ancient may have. The game of the *ready-made*, apart from the purely esthetic problems, which it poses, has as its prerequisite in the fact that one recognizes everywhere, and in everything, the possibility of this double symbolical link.

The second paradox is thus summarized: because the symbolic it takes on is made limitless, the work is reduced to the "literality" of this symbolic. The various poems of the various heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa constitute such a form of hyper-symbolism, which is, we know, exclusive of the creation of a formally finished work of art. Conversely, Fernando Pessoa's poem, "The Counter

Symbol", remarkably illustrates the second aporia of this second paradox (Pessoa 1988: 99). The time in a port creates the present and, through it, the past — the shadow which makes the day go by — and the future, which is expressed through waiting; it creates simultaneously — the contradiction of the "chronography" of the poem starts at this point — the near universality of this present which is as a trans-temporal moment and which presents the place of this present as being the place of a given time, and, consequently, as being the time of a universal place. One place's symbolic system and any other place's symbolic system come into play. This place is, however, merely the place of its own "chronography" and of the consequence of the contradictory usage of this "chronography": there remains only "the story/ of the dead quay since the ship has left" (Pessoa 1988: 99). The exercise of linking the symbolic system of a place and of the symbolic system of any other place and of any other time leaves the poem to its pure "literality", in fact repeatable.

### III. The Literature of Questioning

This constitution of the past in the present, this vain or contradictory link of symbolic systems, this institution of the work of art in any object, in any discourse, which is merely the consequence of the recognition of the symbolic order specific to the work of art and of the symbolic order of that which is not the work of art, is also an issue for the literary work when it presents itself as being expressly constituted according to a particular *poiesis*, for the express design of time and of history. As explicit as may be the status and the literal meaning of the literary work, as certain as may be the manner in which it represents literature and history, it is, through this explicitness and through this certitude, a *question*. Not a question with regards to itself, or to what it expresses, but a question with regards to the relevance of

its own words, of what it is as a literary work. Or in other words: it is a question with regards to that to which it gives the right to exist, a question with regards to that to which it would give the right to exist, through being a work of art, being the representation of a moment in time, of an history, being the game of its own symbolic system with another symbolic system.

This question may become a set of explicit questions, as a poem by the contemporary Portuguese poet, Nuno Judice (Judice 1996: 113) shows:

In Honfleur when  
it rains, are these boats  
bluer?  
In Denmark, without  
hamlet, do these castles  
have some other brand name?  
Don't answer  
questions without answers;  
rivers don't flow  
any faster for  
it.

This poem, whose title is "Enigmas 2", declares itself to be without answers concerning the weather as it is concerning the time that goes by, even though it says that writing constitutes the present and, thus, implies the past, even though this particular writing is shown to be a presentation of Honfleur, which may refer to other presentations of Honfleur, just as a symbol of History, Hamlet, may refer to other historical symbols of Denmark. What literature creates here is both a past, a future and a symbolic system, for which it is not answerable. In the creation of the past, in the recalling of the symbol of the castle, is the intentional property of the text: can it symbolize that which it has not explicitly decided to symbolize — the castles that are not Hamlet's castles? In the design or the hypothesis of the future, is the extensive property of the text: can literary representation include presentations which it had not initially included —

Honfleur, such as time, our climate, our sense of time will certainly make it change? Not to answer makes, however, literature and this poem into that which is pertinent with regards to time which may not be invented — the rivers that do not flow any faster for it.

We find ourselves within a sort of step beyond the consideration of temporal and historical paradox, the consideration of the link of symbolic systems. Writing is, through its own present, whether it looks to the past or the future, that which remains of the present, that which may be neither of the past nor of the future, which it may nevertheless imitate, and to which it may give the right to exist. Writing may only give relevance to its gesture through the acknowledgement of a possible impertinence within the act of invention, which is itself merely the return to a commonplace — as in the image of the rivers. The questions have no answers; however, they are not irrelevant: not because they could be validated — not answering is like refusing validation, and like refusing to decide what literature can be used for —, but because they imply the commonplace of time and the reality of time, the symbols which exist together with all time, which express each other tritely, through the image of the rivers which flow at their own pace.

Recognizing the questions and not answering them significantly changes the scope of the question. Recognizing the questions, or the fact that a literary text cannot prevent these questions from being asked, amounts to observing that a literary text cannot conceal that which it is about: giving the right to exist to that to which it refers and to that which may accompany its citations. Not to answer amounts to stressing the fact that the outcome of the questions does not matter, but rather what the questions allow us to do: find the commonplace, which includes various citations and presentations which enable the writer to cite and to present Honfleur and Hamlet's castle, and which makes possible the citations

and the presentations of other conditions of Honfleur, of other castles in Denmark, even if these citations and these presentations were not pertinent to what Shakespeare says about Hamlet, and to what any writer says about Honfleur. Or in other words: the questions are there because the literary work knows that it designates Honfleur and Hamlet's castle even though no one sees them, just as it designates the past and the future even though no one sees them, either. To create a literary work, to create the new and the past, to observe the other symbolic systems, is merely to open up an extended possibility of mentioning the literary work, the new, the past, and these symbolic systems, without it being possible to express anything other than this possibility. To recognize the *questions* is merely to recognize the limit to be put to the paradox of the institution of the past and of the present, and to the paradox of the linked symbolic orders. and to limit the work by the explicit or non-explicit interrogation of its relevance. Recognizing the questions makes heard again that, if the literary work may present itself in the form of ordinary discourse, it may nevertheless not be of this ordinary discourse, because it is neither the ordinary discourse of an individual, nor the ordinary discourse of a community. The literary work is neither one nor the other, even though it may resemble them, because it presents itself as its own creation, which makes of them the means to its own questions. The affirmation which writing may involve is only a question. The invention of writing is a manner of reducing writing to commonplaces. Outside of these questions and of these commonplaces, this same poem would merely be a manner of private discourse — all expression of the real, of Honfleur, would be the only discourse of a Realist writer who is merely an individual. Outside of these commonplace and of these question, the poet would be the one who, in the invention of writing, uncovers and exposes himself as being caught in the game of time, in

the diversity of symbolic orders, and in the impossibility of giving status and pertinence to writing.

The questioning literary work, as “Enigmas 2” shows, holds its own paradox. It implies the present time and other times, the present world and other worlds, the subject who writes, who reads, and another subject, and the symbolic systems which are linked to these times and worlds. Its relevance cannot nevertheless be expressed according to the present world and other worlds, the present time and other times, this subject and another subject, the various symbolic systems. However, it offers a solution to this paradox, by suggesting that all what we can say, all what we can express about reality, is bound to a kind of denegation — to consider Hamlet’s castle is implicitly to ignore the other castles, and to consider the boats by a sunny day is implicitly to ignore how the boats appear when it rains. This suggestion amounts to defining the literary creation by its power to disclose the “problematicity” of the real, to make known it as independent, as the present time and the other time, this present world and the other worlds are so made known. The questions are the means of this procedure. They make useless the idea that the past and the present are reciprocal inventions and that the linking of the symbolic orders only equates them to empty entities.

The questions which are brought forth by this questioning poem come to one question: for what literature is answerable when it places the literary work within common discourse, when it places its newness within the designation of the past, when it creates its own present and, through this, is the designation of another time, and an explicit play on other symbolic systems? The answer to this question lies in expressing questions, which designate the *independence* of the real, of any time.

Consequently, the kind literature of literature, which Nuno Judice’s poem exemplifies does not identify



its questions with a game of skepticism nor with a game of indetermination — those games which characterize the limitless literature. It goes against this literature which is both the calculation of the invention and of the institution of the past and of the literary work, and the avowal of its own reflexivity, of the game of “desymbolization” which results from linking symbolic orders, of the removal of the references of the past, which result from the reciprocal invention of the past and the present. This calculation and this avowal are those which make heard, within their extreme illustrations, that writing has no more distinctive status, nor any decidable property, and that it may present itself, as Gertrude Stein has shown, both as the equivalent of private writing — *Brewsie and Willie* — and as a manner of public soliloquy which gives the right to existence to all people and to all things — *Ida*. Let us add that the first example is placed within the realm of the relationship between brother and sister, and the second of that between twins. This ends the game of private and public writing, and leaves the question of relevance unanswered, as the interpretation of the present and of history leaves it unanswered.

#### IV.

It is possible to reread the two paradoxes of the limitless literature within the perspective of the literature of questioning. The first paradox may be understood in relationship to the contradiction which time creates, the contradiction of ideas and of the daily spectacle of finite time. There can be an idea of time; there can be an experience of time. Their relationship, insofar as we are within a game of nominalist characterization of the past and of the present, is unspeakable. The second paradox may be understood in relationship of narrative restriction. Narrative is a play on the past, such as it is invented through the recognition of the new. It is also, thus, recognition of the symbolic order of the past — an

equivocal recognition which is both the motive of the narrative and the risk of its impossibility: except if it were not the present of its own expression, narrative cannot be the complete return to this symbolic order. Valéry and Kafka describe the transition of the first two paradoxes of literary Modernity to the third paradox through the use that the former makes of the temporal contradiction and that the second makes of narrative restriction.

Valéry is both the poet of “*midi le juste*” and of the poem “*The Oarsman*” (Valéry 1957: 152):

Bent over a great river, my oars infinitely  
Wrest me regretfully from the happy surroundings;  
Soul with heavy hands, full of paddles,  
The sky must give way to the knell of the slow blades.

Through the play on essences and on the things of time past, Valéry’s poetry is absolutely skeptical, in the following sense: what the mind knows, what it writes, never rejoins the real; this knowledge is merely in competition with the words and the things of finite time. The critique of language, which characterizes Valéry’s essays and notebooks, is merely the consequence of this disposition, which his poetry shows and proves. The absence of metaphorical play linking these two orders in the poetic expression conveys this skepticism. Consequently, there is a constant play on identity and otherness: the identity of the essences which the poem furnishes, the otherness of the finite world which is represented in confrontation with these essences. The poet appears all the more as a major figure since he is the one who formulates this dissociation, and, we must add, this incapacity of poetry to constitute itself as a form of full expression, capable of the greatest coextension with the real. According to Valéry, coextension is only possible through the discontinuity of the essences and the things of the finite world, although the designation of essences, such as in «*midi le juste*», cannot be dissociated from the perception of this world. The identity of this world is

merely the counterpart to the identity of poetry. Poetry is literally representation — representation being understood in a cognitive sense — because it alone includes the presentations of the world. That is why the identity of the poetic agent, the identity of poetry, the identity of the finite world are clearly preserved. The choice of an impracticable clarity, that which «midi le juste» implies, is directly related to these identities which work as proximate references, without any of these identities being a question in itself: none of these identities is reworked in such a way as to be an interrogation of what its extension might be or of the other identities. The notion of pure poetry is thus ambivalent. It expresses the accomplishment of poetry for itself — in which poetry says only what it says. It expresses the other identities, without poetry being the gathering up of these identities.

The skepticism, which characterizes this poetry, is thus, paradoxically, the means of preserving all otherness and of making of the existential figure of the poet the only link of these identities. This existential figure does not correspond exactly to the figure of the poet who writes, because the latter is merely he who accomplishes the poetry. This dissociation of the existential figure of the poet and of the figure of the poet who writes has a consequence: although the disposition of the poetry is a skeptical disposition, the skepticism is in the end result channeled through the existential figure who is as the interpreter of this skepticism and of the world outside which the poem refers to. To designate this interpreter is merely to affirm that the recognition of time, that of the various symbolical orders, those of «midi le juste», those of finite time, are perfectly heterogeneous forms of recognition which leave these various presentations to themselves, as outside of any game of a symbolical power, as outside of any game which would transmit the

contradiction of the figuration of time, and of the ideas of time.

So we tell stories, as Kafka does in “The Silence of the Mermaids” (Kafka 1953: 78). We may tell of that which has already been told, which is merely the repetition of what the story itself does — repeat what has happened, what has been done. The story repeats it now — through which it proves that there is no present without a mixture of past and present and that this is precisely what makes narrative difficult. The narrative, in repeating, cannot only repeat: it over-determines, it under-determines; doing so, it extinguishes the repeated in itself, the past, which becomes as the calculation of an other thing. Nothing is left but a nebulous interpretation of the repetition. Such is Kafka’s demonstration in “The Silence of the Mermaids”. The narrative repeats Homer, by altering Ulysses’ conduct, and that of the mermaids which here become silent. Through silence, there is a play on the under-determination of the repeated narrative. There is also a play on over-determination: silence is the mermaids’ greatest trick, greater than that of Ulysses. As silence, for the one who has plugged his hears, is not recognizable as such, we must also see in the invention of the mermaids’ silence an over-determination of Ulysses’ conduct — he uses trickery against the mermaids and against the gods themselves. By its game of under-determination and of over-determination, attached to the repetition it performs, the narrative is merely its own “literality”, which extinguishes that which is repeated, or which makes it as though it were constantly enigmatic — by another trick of the repetition, it is said that Ulysses did not know that the mermaids were silent, as they did not know that he did not know. The “literality” of the narrative is this repetition, which is at once an invention of the ancient, a novelty, and the evidence that the return to the other symbolic universe leaves this universe to itself and the narrative to its own words. In this, there is characterization of

narrative: in the same manner that a gloss would say, according to Kafka, that the god of destiny could not see into Ulysses' heart, the inside of the narrative, which is repeated, may not be penetrated by the narrative which performs the repetition, nor the inside of this latter narrative. It may be said that Kafka's narrative is a play on its own silence: as it does express the ultimate truth about the mermaids, it delivers no final interpretation, which would equate the repetition of Homer to a kind of argument. The enigma of this narrative responds to the one the Mermaids episode in Homer. Kafka's narrative is, in its own way, as silent as the mermaids.

In "The Silence of the Mermaids", the commentary which follows the narrative is merely a way of playing on the silence with which the narrative ultimately surrounds the past and the future, as well as the symbolic system that it makes use of. As in a description of Honfleur, as in the reference to Hamlet's castle made by Nuno Juidce, narrative may nevertheless hear its own words, understand itself according to its own literality, through which the question of the limits of narrative subsists. It is the question of what is repeated by the narrative, and what it cannot explicitly express because it implies the silence of what it repeats, of what it says anew, in a manner of newness which cannot be measured because to measure it would imply the clear link of Homer's symbolic system and that of the narrative.

That this silence makes possible to express, in « The Silence of the Mermaids », both the mermaids and destiny, teaches us that the infinite game of possible cross-references entails that no narrative may tell a straight story and so that its singular space calls upon the memory of the entirely Other and upon the invention of the future of the narrative.

**V.**

If we return to Nuno Judice, there remains, insofar as the literary work can be sure neither of its own temporal game, nor of its own symbolic game, only the possibility of questioning, as an affirmation of those limits which the acknowledgement of the new and the heterogeneity of the symbolical orders contain, and as a means to designating these orders, the old and the new, the time to come, without the poem or the narrative being anything other than this implicit or explicit questioning. The nature of the question must be stated. It is not a way that the literary work has of asking questions so as to try to go back to the game of the old and of the new, to the game of the link of symbolic orders, but rather a way of playing on the presentations provided by the work. If, therefore, Hamlet's castle and Honfleur are expressed, there is no reason to undo what has thus been said. We must note that with regards to other castles in Denmark, that with regards to other moments in Honfleur, a citation or a presentation of Honfleur, a citation or a presentation of Hamlet's castle, are precisely literal citations. A reference may, however, be given to them, and they are nevertheless citations and presentations made enigmatic through the acknowledgement of the limits of all patterns of the old and of the new, of all limits of symbolical link. The questions are the formulation of these limits.

However, the questions are more than this. They accept what is literally admissible — the citations and the presentations of Honfleur, and of Hamlet's castle —; but they submit them to a game of inference. Honfleur, the castle, these citations, these presentations, and these denominations are the objects of the question, of the question of their property; they are also, through these questions, the hypothesis of possible contexts; they are, lastly, because the possible contexts are merely possible,

the occasion for a reflexive movement, indicated in the poem by the words of the enunciator and by the decision not to reply to these questions. This reflexive movement is the return to the literality of the citations, and of the presentations. This movement does not, however, undo the interrogation on the possible context, at the same time as it gives to itself the context of the commonplace. The questions are thus an occasion for returning to literality, for making of this literality both an occasion for and a limit to the inferential game, for affirming that this literality is a common literality, which concludes with the citation of the commonplace. The commonplace may lead back to the questions, if we, as writers or as readers, so decide. But such a gesture would amount to refusing to leave the questions to themselves, to their own property, and to ignoring the function of the citation of the commonplace, which is, precisely, to affirm, through the questions themselves, that such citations and such presentations may open onto other frames of time, onto other symbolic systems, without the literality of the literary work ceasing to be readable according to a specific property, even though it calls for the acknowledgement of the « enigmas » in the title of the poem.

What we have considered as the third paradox of Modernity is, in fact, a functional paradox: the acceptance of the paradox of the institution and of the removal of the references of the past, the acceptance of various symbolic systems and the affirmation of their lack of assured link, and, lastly, the making of these two impasses into the means to posing the question of the relevance of the literary work, with regards to all other time, with regards to all other symbolic systems. The question of the relevance is only explicitly or implicitly raised in order to be able to identify the literary work as a specific figure, the figure of thought on communication. We must thus re-read Nuno Judice's « Enigmas ». The citations and the



presentations of Honfleur, and of Hamlet's castle, are, through the questions that they raise, a sort of signal of communication. These same citations, these same presentations are the possibilities of an inferential game. They are also the certitude of a form of communication because they lead back to their own literality and to the commonplace. It is all the more appropriate not to respond to the questions since the citations and the presentations of Honfleur and of Hamlet's castle play thus a triple role: firstly, as that which is a pertinent literality with regards to a given object; secondly, as that which is a form of literality, which through the questions that it raises, may give rise to the mental construction of the other of this object, without presenting it as having been reinvented or lost; thirdly, as that which, through this game, preserves the symbolic system of common communication — the commonplace of the rivers that flow. We find ourselves, here, beyond the contradiction which characterizes the first two paradoxes of Modernity, and beyond the game of deconstructing the literary discourse.

## Bibliography

Danto, Arthur (1997). *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fuentes, Carlos (1993). *Geografía de la novela*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Judice, Nuno (1992). *Um Canto na Espessura do Tempo*. Lisboa: Quetzal editores.

Judice, Nuno (1996). *Un chant dans l'épaisseur du temps, suivi de Méditation sur ruines*. Paris: Gallimard.

Kafka, Franz (1953). *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande e und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlass*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag.

Pessoa, Fernando (1952). *Obras completas*. Lisboa: Ática.

Pessoa, Fernando (1988). *Cancioneiro*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.