Literature, Art and the Pursuit of Decay in Twentieth-Century France

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I

One of my earliest impressions of reading is of listening to books I do not understand. Whether of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Winnie the Pooh*, the reading in this memory is addressed principally by my father at my brother; the books are not of my age though I am being lovingly or indulgently included in the event. The words have an odd resonance which I imagine has remained with me since, word and sound wrap me in a security blanket made largely of my own silence; an uncomfortable cocoon nurturing the language that I am given to speak.

I realise now, with all the clarity of hindsight, that many of the issues raised by this anecdote are pursued in these essays: reading; generosity and exclusion; intimacy and coercion; the revolt and determinism acted out in reading. But why France? I suppose that given an ear for the word such as I have just described, it is easy to chart the journey of my interest in both literature and images not drawn from my native culture, my pursuit of the places and stories lying behind my parents and from there, paradoxically, to some striving for a thinking and a speaking place of my own. But in any case, a fascination with France hardly needs any explanation of that kind, though the indeterminacy of living in English and working with French has given me much to think about in writing the essays that are my chosen form of expression in this book. To be immersed in the arts and the intellectual life generally of France is to be exposed to many of the dominant cultural developments in Europe: the Renaissance; Cartesianism and deconstruction; the Enlightenment and the Romantic counter-charge; Cubist brutalisation of appearance and Surrealist contempt for it; postmodernist downgrading of vatic empires. At the same time, paradox and lack of direction seem to proliferate and make a mockery of any definite trajectory or the attempt to impose one – any education we might

glean from France can only be characterised, it seems, by the notorious 'défaut de ligne droite' that Frédéric suffers from in *L'Education sentimentale*. Montaigne writes the authentic self only to add to the tower of Babel he abhors and adores; Corneille seeks heroism and discovers the bureaucrat; Baudelaire frankly pursues beauty in decay; and Proust, at the very moment of synthesis and resolution, reminds us of what the mind can never capture of its own flights, and enjoins us to read his enormous work over again, or even to imagine a wholly different one in tracking down the secrets of our souls.

This combination of discovery and hazard, fanfare and disharmony is a dominant feature of the new Renaissance that is twentieth-century modernism in France. I still find it striking to think of the chance encounters that mark the lives of so many of the participants in this polymorphous innovative mesh. Having introduced Picasso to Braque, triggering in that way the great Cubist upheaval of mimesis, Apollinaire, now invalided out of the Great War, meets Philippe Soupault in the Café de Flore and says to him of Breton: 'Vous êtes faits pour vous connaître.' The unpretentious spontaneity with which two such major investigations of perception and unconscious impulse are set in motion is a constant reminder of the confidence and the idealism characteristic of art not only in France but in Europe from the turn of the century to the outbreak of World War II. But the stakes are high, the ambitions elusive, the prospects of failure as troubling to artists as they may be disappointing to viewers and readers.

Impatience with the old and pursuit of the new in French art has taken its place in the diaspora of such approaches not only in Europe but in North America, not only in the arts themselves but in critical debate. Many would still argue that promises of innovation have flattered only to deceive. Much disappointment has emerged with the hopeless and hapless ambition to change the world through art; and with the disintegration of that ambition into formalism on the one hand and relativism on the other. Distinctions between the modern and the avant-garde and even the postmodern seem to tumble into so many ruins faced with what has developed into a barrage of disappointment in the apparent incapacity of any self-consciously contemporary art to deal adequately with the dominant cultural and political issues of its time.

In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot seems to have handed on to us not only a canonical moment in modernist innovation, but also a focal point in the disaffection it triggers. The poem offers a freedom of poetic expression unparalleled in 1926, the year of its publication, a breadth of focus powerful enough in itself, perhaps, to reorientate the mind and the heart. But *The Waste Land* is also a testimony to a sense of woeful and wilful isolationism at the heart of its own practice and artistic practice at large. The plurality and the cultural diversity of the voices involved in the poem is but a performance, it

might seem, of Poetry's disintegration into the nomadic and the monadic. The intertextual relations between these bits would seem but another sign of confusion, of the futility of Poetry's attempts to sustain some language with which to speak history and the unfolding of a sense of self. Tiresias the soothsayer is now definitively blind and the 'dugs' Eliot gives him appear to signal yet another phase in this *Götterdämmerung*, and not some androgynous power to redraw the boundaries of knowledge and of the imagination.

At another extreme, the collapse of the epic embrace staged by *The Waste Land* triggers a corresponding, equally disaffected, response to the 'modern'. Berated for its obsession with the fragmented and the contingent, conversely it is suspected of insidious, translucent attachments to some 'Grand Narrative'. Symptoms seem to abound of a yearning for the recovery of some synthesis or synthetic form. For a moment, works of art might have seemed able to bring together endings and their beginnings, experiences and their places, voices and the bodies they might call their own. Instead, the poetic grand embrace of our experience seems only to feed us on timorous, insidiously static accounts of history and the psyche.

So the modernist text both in France and in Europe is both criticised for its failure to put bodies in places and martyrised for its efforts to do that. A purely aesthetic or formal investigation of the social and economic relation would seem to affirm nothing but its own impotence faced, say, with two world wars and the vested interests of class and state that drive them. And a formalist investigation of the unconscious emerges all but empty-handed, perhaps, in its fabricated attempts to come to terms with the Holocaust. Oedipus and Julien Sorel seem equally hollow. Furthermore, the alternative prospect of a space free of contamination by myth and narrative, a micro-identity responding impulsively to psychic and informational environments seems to offer that lack of direction which favours only market forces, their emblems and their magnetism. At such a point, postmodernism seems anticipated by that breathless but immobile energy of Flaubert's sentimental 'education'.

Brecht's alienation effects have had much to say about the capacity of individuals, either sitting in theatres or faced with the wider spectacle, to break their attachments, to reform their perceptions and reconstruct their identifications. But perhaps these effects' most important lesson is still the one coming at its loudest from *Galileo Galilei* – a message that is the most consistently denied. Why should we expect to have heroes able to solve the intractable and dynamic problems of life? Why should artistic expression of any kind perform the heroic task of resolving the contradictions of our social, cultural and psychic experience? If relativity and formalism are in fact to be the life-blood of aesthetic expression in a modernist mode, why should those features be laid exclusively at the door of art? Why should art be solely

responsible for provoking these spectres or, ultimately, for laying them aside? On the contrary, might not a new partnership of the relative and the formal allow new and different constructions of place, space and self?

Aesthetic experience is an experience of forms; it is driven by an attempt to reach beyond form, beyond that complacent formalism that is the disappointing legacy of Marcel Duchamp's Dada-ist anti-art. Richard Wollheim, writing on R. B. Kitaj, argues that modernism – and its self-questioning, self-exceeding incarnations as the avant-garde – can be divided into an investigation of art and an investigation of sensation. To distinguish Duchamp from Kitaj in that way allows Wollheim to speculate in highly fruitful ways on the Romantic element in the ambitions of twentieth-century art in Europe. But this continuing face-off of figurative and abstract expression suggests interplay and interaction just as much as opposition and difference. Sensation is sensed as form; not abstracted into form, but breathing in forms that range in their appeal from the bodily, to the perceptual, to the mnemonic, to the psychic . . . To deny this action of form would be merely to elevate sensation to the status of redeemer, to purify it of its vitality, its slipperiness, its ever-presence and its transience – in fact, to formalise it. Equally, to overestimate the power of forms would be to give in without much struggle to the tendency of the mind to deal in certainties, in the different kinds of immobility which, while greasing the wheels of enlightenment, also lower the foundations of entrenchment and authority.

Form and authority are as inextricably linked to one another as subversion and relativity. Blinkered relativity may leave us rudderless and exploitable, with no comment to make beyond the contingent; and yet to fragment is an analytical and rhetorical procedure that allows for new beginnings, new platforms in our self-awareness and its temporality. But fragmentation also signals loudly the hubris of its own ambition not only to make new beginnings but to create, and to assert that God-like independence we mourn so consistently and on which we nevertheless depend to function at all in the real world of the relative. Much French writing has thrived on the lessons to be learnt and unlearnt from this range of ambivalences. From the investigative essay writing of Montaigne, to the dilettantish essayism that one of Nerval's narrators is accused of indulging in, to the enormous continuity of memory and its interruptions that is the writing of Proust, and up to the erotic pull of the broken up that is put on display in Barthes, the unfinished and the dispelling of endings have made possible a sense that experience may be laid bare, or at least come to terms with on unfamiliar grounds, elucidated beyond the coercions of expectation and habit.

Such aspiration in French writing and art depends on a specifically textured practice of reading or looking, a hermeneutics of textual place, an open-ended but involved encounter between text and those to whom it is

offered. To insist, as I shall be doing in these essays, that the text can act as an arena for engagement with questions of identity and its representation, is neither to seclude texts in a retrogressive delusion of their own autonomy, nor to extend their spheres of influence beyond measure, beyond the compass of any temporal or social context or conflict. The amorphousness of the textual approach does make it resistant to the particular qualities of any one reading or analysis, and also to the limits of context; but resistant also to appropriation and censorship. And that same amorphousness makes the text the site of its own invasion, its own dispelling or vaporisation at the hands of those moments in history and discourse, those moments in subjective and affective life that it seeks to engage with. To designate as 'text' is to dissolve the authority needed to designate. Looked at in this way, a text is able to perform its own protest against formalist and formalised complacency, if not necessarily its own immunity to that; and its own protest against the smooth passage from such complacency to fantasies of autocracy and the incitement to pursue them.

Imagining texts involves an economy of some kind, then. An all-too-familiar experience of exchange, perhaps, of trying at so many levels – symbolic, egoistic, amorous, imaginary – to get some return on the investments of energy and pain demanded in the social domain. But this economy stretches over a terrain which, though still a terrain with boundaries, is continually shifting and changing shape. Creativity is a crucial part of that economy, demystified from the Freudian analysis of the ego and its incurable discontents to the postmodernist dismay at the vicissitudes of individualism, in the light of which notions of creativity seem to serve merely as a set of nostalgic bulwarks. But the ego will not let go, it does not recover from those discontents but clings to them, even in the Lacanian manhandling of its misreadings and acquisitive cognitions. This working insight forms the basis of the Lacanian theory of the Imaginary, under whose spell Barthes thinks and writes so consistently, and which he develops through his reading of Sartre among others. This book will also fall under that spell to the extent that it will seek to examine some of its qualities and effects, and the shrouds it envelops us in. But the essays that follow also endeavour to remain alert to hope as it is rekindled, the spectacular hope reigniting in French art and thought that these mantels of imaginary response might fray or blow off or decay, or be given new life.

And yet the impulse to drive the many through the channels of the one seems indomitable; it is that same indispensable impulse which seeks out ways of dealing with the diffuse, the incomprehensible or the yet-to-be-understood, as well as the traumatic. Such impulse has no source, but thrives on traces of projects and failures. Well-known as such traces are to the procedures of deconstruction and structural psychoanalysis, they are just as

active in the multitudes of encounters, in the specks of image, dialogue and solitude that make up experience at its most transitory; and just as active again in the insidious magnitude of the dominant idea or model. These traces and imprints are what I mean by form; and it is for that reason that responses to form will have such a leading role to play in the essays that follow.

The plastic adaptability and malleability of form seem inexhaustible, especially but by no means exclusively in French art: the exuberant inconsistency of Balzac's narrative voices; the mobile narrative silences with which Flaubert sketches in the air affective responses of all kinds from adoration to revulsion; let me mention as well the magnificent stagings of impassioned commitment married to inconsequence orchestrated by Puccini; and the simultaneous joy and despair displayed by Barthes at the fragment, at the incompletion it offers as well as the resumption of rhetorical and imaginary power it warns against. George Santayana has written that knowledge is not an embrace but a salutation; form, like knowledge, is both. Alternately tyrannical and generous in the impulses it stages, form gives voice and place to the passion, the malice, the collaboration and the abdication . . . that make up the relations of an 'I'.

If art consists in formal play, then it meets non-art at every corner. Such is the mark left in the mind by André Gide and Marcel Proust amongst so many other French writers. Formal awareness need not involve withdrawal from the issues of the day and the sensations of the body. It may also signal the efforts of the mind to draw on experience and the range of projects and memories that each one of us carries forward through time: a process that produces mobility rather than stability, prompts further readings, further platforms of foresight and hindsight and their collapse. Form consists in the form taken by an idea – any idea, even the idea of a word or a sensation; and art is then a balletic mimesis, a dance in the dark with the brilliant shadows of our identifications, their power as well as their hollowness. The death of the author proposed by Barthes at the beginning of the postwar textual revolution emanating from France has not involved the death of the subject. Neither postmodern euphoria nor the systematic suspicion that illuminates thinking on gender have displaced the subject as a privileged focus of speculation and fascination, of speculation about fascination. Rather than dismembering the subject, dispelling the spectres of intentionality has re-immersed subjectivity in an indefinite range of symptoms and signifiers. For practitioners and critics to espouse anti-art in any antagonistic way is to tilt at windmills, to imagine a beyond to discourse that few would claim it has the capacity to produce, and which in any case would be as illusory as the power of knowledge generally to embrace and to hold.

Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia perhaps still more brutally know how to distinguish between the clockwork and the enigma of their art; but

this is juxtaposition rather than burial, a broken or suspended dialogue rather than an escorting from the stage. This face-off involving fabrication and detritus has the capacity to lay identifications bare, or if not those, then the idea of them, if not that then the appeal of them, or the horror of them, or the tyrannies and even the disappearance of them. Art does not evaporate when it is invaded by the arbitrary, nor when anything and everything can be designated as art at a Dadaist stroke. Art does not have that utopia in its gift. On the contrary, the malleable quality of aesthetic forms is itself a performance of an indomitable imaginary power to adapt to the novel and to the unknown, a power woven out of both shedding and assimilation, a power that absorbs the new and the vital exactly to the extent that it gives it form, which mobilises, but also recognition, which stabilises.

Such concerns, specific to much French art and thought of the last century, link up that art with parallel developments in the rest of Europe. Take Damien Hirst's *Shark*. It clings to the notions of art by its place in the gallery and in the columns of art criticism. But such a place has been eliminated from the work itself, which constructs a dynamic exclusion zone for itself out of shark carcass suspended in formaldehyde. But if only through the refractions of the glass box that houses this chemical sarcophagus, as well the striking cleanliness of its surfaces that also signal a green knot of depth, Hirst's object probes its way into some of the dominant crisis points of its day: the urge to imprison, environmental pollution, the technological and philosophical violence with which humanity establishes its domain.

This piece as well as others by Hirst continues the project initiated by Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare* of having the surface tension of an external form picture the internal, behind-the-scenes mechanisms that produce such a surface and hold it in place. In *Shark* that surface is displayed for the appearance of a surface it projects, a surface appearance which covers not only that range of issues I have just mentioned (it is not just a thematic surface), but the capacity to think them, and to think them all in the same intellectual sweep. The vitality and appeal of this formal, imaginary breadth and breath comes from the spontaneous mobility it gives to the eye and the mind.

But on the other hand, this mobility is also formed in a codifiable context, one that begins in that way to show its seams and to disintegrate – despairingly perhaps, or insouciantly – into its constituent elements, to lose its range and deftness, and even glamour and to *show that loss*. Like innumerable, magnificent, courageous works from the past, Hirst's piece is addressed at what is not known or what apparently cannot be known. Picturings, forms and surfaces, whether inside out or eyes front, have that power to extend beyond their own textual properties without abandoning them or succeeding remotely in any attempt to abandon them. Textual properties continue to

abound uncannily even in the uneasy space of their disappearance. This capacity to invent an inside out, an evaporation of its own terms of reference, provides formal play with the basis of a decay, and of a generosity emerging from that which this book has as its mission to explore.

II

To suggest that there is any one dominant concern in French twentieth-century art might turn out to be a precise example of some of the problems I have just been evoking: the fascinations and silences, the fantasies and despair, the promised land and the exiles, the bold affirmations and stark decay of the image.

Notions of the image seem to invite their own collapse and simultaneously to resist it. Psychoanalysts as well as phenomenologists and poets have thought that in some senses the image acts like a synthesis. Let me take the perspective of psychoanalysis for a moment. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud acknowledges that synthesis is an integral part of the capacity to think and learn, to grasp the basic principles of body and society. But he goes on to argue that the need to synthesise provokes resentment of the steps in the ladders of authority that learning leaves us no option but to climb. Will this orthodoxy survive and impress, or be dismissed and made to crumble? If the latter, would we then be left in a utopia of pure self-expression, or without any way of intervening in the arbitrariness of experience? Put in these terms of a pursuit of synthesis, the image seems at once appropriative and timorous.

Many poets and artists subscribe to this synthetic quality of the image and all its ambivalences. But what of the stunning exuberance, admired by Picasso and many others, in Velázquez's visualisations of the body in its circumstantial moment? Or Baudelaire's dramatisations of sense, sex and mortality? Or Magritte's silent witness to psychic invasion? Or Picasso's own magnificent account of the endless possible marriages of form and body? In these terms, the image seems adventurous, taboo-breaking, with the power not only to transcend category but to brutalise it: the stuff of invention itself, the springboard of an ability to juggle with the dimensions of life.

As I suggested earlier, notions of *l'imaginaire* in postwar French thought confirm this ambivalent type of response to the image. Put simply, at both the conscious and the unconscious levels, a sense of completion and the pursuit of dominance loses out to messages of exchange, of community, of the Word at large. But competition of this kind easily gives way to coming together; competing against involves not so much competing with but within. To say I is not necessarily to espouse the bitty plurality of social

exchange; it is far more, perhaps, to reignite the impulse to singularity, the drive to re-anoint the only true narcissistic One, centre stage, free to name without the interference of others. Knowledge, after all, is built on synthesis renewed, not just shattered; the unconscious is built on repression and not in some dialogue of equals with that process. To be unconscious of the unconscious, to be blind to symptom and codes of all kinds is certainly to exist in an imaginary seclusion and delusion; but is it not also simply to *function* in symbolic exchange and in the jostling for a dominant point of view that makes up any cultural moment?

And if the imaginary – where word is matched to body, or to objects, or to memory – and symbolic – where words breed in the mouths of others – compete only to meet, then this is more than a theoretical nicety. It is a further chapter in the narratives of violence and discontent announced in the Freudian logic and traced in the formal revolts of the French twentieth-century avant-garde that this book deals with. Narcissism is not set aside in such stories, but takes ever new forms, finds ever different places, hide-outs and positions within discourse from which to resume its operations. This narcissism is at the heart of the discontent that Freud diagnoses in civilisation, and which is his bleak answer to the bleak question 'why war?'

Issues of power and dominance and the unrelenting pursuit of them will abound in what I will have to say in these essays. But this is not a book of political philosophy or of cultural theory. I leave to others the rewards of engaging with, say, Althusser's work on a Marxist imaginary, or with a post-colonial imaginary, to take that other example. This book returns to the intellectual tradition in France stretching back from the *nouveau roman* and its vicissitudes in the postwar period, through Breton to Baudelaire and beyond. My revisiting takes on, and takes at face value the belief evident in that tradition that in various ways and with various degrees of confidence, an investigation of the formal properties of aesthetic practice has the power to point the way, at least, to some mobility, to some slack in the constraints of bodily and psychic place. Art may not change the world, but it may give us the power to imagine new beginnings and endings, different stories of exchange and coercion, of bankruptcy or generosity.

Such investment in form reaches beyond formalism, and beyond those critical distinctions I mentioned earlier that have divided modernism from avant-gardism. The twentieth-century French texts, visual and verbal, that this book deals with also reach beyond such divides in their formal examinations of the relation of word to image, image to body, body to sign, sign to authority, authority to exchange. The essays here offer their own kind of history of that formal, textual engagement in France with the psychosocial dramas of the time.

I am not troubled, or have ceased to be, by opening the book with a

return to Cubism, that canonical starting-point in the history of the European avant-garde. The focus of my attention has moved to the model. I have become involved here in the tentacles of emulation and the ways in which they manoeuvre, with Mephistophelean vitality, amidst the prospect of some all-pervasive deconstruction of authority that Cubist practice insistently holds out some hope of.

The issue of the model is taken up in chapter 2 through a discussion of the particular fascination of Roland Barthes with things imaginary which is evident from his early writing onwards. The chapter charts a navigation from Barthes's early Structuralist optimism to his later writerly fascination with the volatile, rather wild and unlikely dreams of autonomy and impermeability that for him seem to characterise the tendencies of mind and psyche in response to culture. Each of Barthes's own accounts of these tendencies signals a further pursuit of some resistance to the coercions but also the allures of sense.

It is in that retrospective light that my discussion of prewar French avant-garde practice draws to a close with the two following chapters on Surrealism. In my presentation of Robert Desnos's verbal games as well as of René Magritte's visual ones, the emphasis is shifted away from ludic anarchism in the signifier, away from utopian visions of a mind without repression and a society with no police, and towards the imaginary dimension of that very ambition. At once desperate and inventive, these investigations of the sign feed and fuel the pursuit of a beyond to sense-making, rather than dispelling such an idea and escorting it from the stage. And even if that pursuit were in the end to meet with some kind of success, subverting the conformity of making sense might still leave untroubled the adaptable conservatism of the orthodox and the known.

In its investigation of imaginary, happily intact awarenesses of mentality, sensuality and their boundaries, Barthes's writing is itself made of an intertextual space involving Sartre and Lacan. Perhaps the maleness of this panoply advertises in advance the problems and the impasses encountered in this book: that endless oscillation between the twin mirages of phallic autocracy and a social relation free of the ego. Certainly the poeticised theorising of Irigaray, to take that one salient example from feminist philosophical inventiveness, has opened up the dynamic possibilities of an aroused, sexualised living space of difference, of exchange promoting separation rather than assimilation, of a separateness in dialogue with coming together, but not bound or destined to bring together; an ability to think genders and sexualities, the range of other places of thinking and sensing, without also thinking their antagonism. Barthes's own strategic silence on the subject of his own sexuality signals that same desire for a non-antagonistic mode of thought – 'y-a-t-il une transgression de la transgression?'; and signals also a strategic

humility that acts as an antidote to the empire building of his own and of any other discourse. His as well as Irigaray's approach or *Weltanshauung* or rhetoric is a concerted attempt to extricate itself from Antony's heuristic 'I have come to bury Caesar not praise him.' Burial at one level serves only the battle over boundary and the need for it; it resists decay quite as much as bearing witness to it. Ways of accepting decay, or working, writing and imagining with it rather than against it are what the final three chapters of this book are devoted to exploring; and it is a commitment to that idea of decay that I am proposing as a defining feature of postwar development in French avant-gardism.

The idea of decay may be troubling; but it need not be morbid. There is still no more troubling, nauseating, speech-defying occurrence than Nazi atrocity. Jean Fautrier's *Les Otages* deals with that face on. Without blaming the victim or espousing its position, these paintings work in the most starkly material and bodily dimension of that experience and make it over into a platform for undercutting the undeniable, unstoppable, voracious pursuit of a power to asphyxiate. With Fautrier's art, the stage is set in this book for seeking out generosity in discursive, sexual and social relations – a generosity that seeks to set aside even the hubristic ambition to do away with violence; a generosity that seeks instead to work with the existential violences of mortality on the one hand and the demands of socialisation on the other. Duras seeks a way beyond incomprehension and resentment in the sexual relation. Genet seeks passages past the image-fortresses of racialism and colonialism. But these are not purely wilful affirmations; this is not thinking or imagining modelled on the edifice or the secured alternative. A beyond comes from a within; the within of the reader's experience and its scope, but also its passing and its scattering.

Earlier in this Prologue, I set out in polemical terms the ambition for reading that my engagement with French modernism of the last century has committed me to. That polemic develops into a plea in the rest of this book: a plea for reading as translation and transport; for the silent subjectivity discovered every time the eye absorbs word or image; for the imagining of an other 'I' within 'I'; and for the imagining, if nothing more, of a community and a music of collapsing defence.

Epilogue

Pursuit and decay – the one concerned with fulfilment, the other dissolution. This apparent antinomy speaks about the nature of the problems that I have engaged with in the essays here: the mutual dependency of orthodoxy and subversion; of celebration and revolt; of creativity and mortality.

Books by definition come to an end, and I would like to find a farewell appropriate to the gifts of the artists and writers I have discussed, and who have produced in me the critical passion and perhaps the critical humility that I have tried to communicate here. But I cannot think beyond the conventional way of concluding which consists in reviewing the intellectual kernels that I have nurtured and which have formed my critical orientation and my critical idiom. Still, in that way I might succeed in emulating those great conclusions in literature and in film which effect a kind of letting go, a dispelling of obsession, or rather a returning of perennial inwardness to some public domain, anonymous but also *noisy*. As Stendhal's grief-stricken narrator puts it so ambivalently at the conclusion of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, all the jails are empty at the moment of farewell and dissolution.

There has been much talk here of form and of various investments in that idea. The manipulation of form provides an obvious starting-point for a definition of the aesthetic. Rapidly, though, the magnificence of such manipulation testifies to an equally magnificent overestimation of the powers of hand and eye, of fantasy and mentality at large to redirect the terms of life and of any interaction with the material, the social, the sexual, the racial . . . But this spectacular and specular juggling with the dimensions of life might still reach past the nostalgic play of matching sensation, association and thought to the environment that prompts them. Such nostalgia is the harbinger of its own temporality and its own falling away. In the texts I have been involved with, grabbing a hold of the world in the mind, assigning it shapes and codes and models is a sensual response and a response to the

senses, those very sensations that have decay and mortality as their unspoken word. In *L'Etreinte* that preoccupied me in chapter 1, Picasso brings a life-time working with what the body's appearance disguises back to the body itself – that is, inevitably, to further surface representations of the body's mnemonics and its elusiveness. But this 'further surface' punctures the obsession of art with itself, it is a place where the indomitable pursuit of a mirror-matching of one body to another can be shown to collapse in an orgasmic mess. Participants in this art might be detached from their governing sexualities, let loose rather than shaped and quantified; time may say this, Picasso suggests, or its passing, or ageing might.

So there is a humanity of form that takes it beyond arid formalism: perhaps we might at least imagine forms of exchange that do more than confirm the terms of any transaction past and future. Luce Irigaray has done more than many to move symbolic exchange on from method-inspired narcissism and towards sites where a range of positions, perspectives and subjective histories might interact. Such is the notion of form I have tried to present here: various ways of telling the story of French, or rather Paris-centred, twentieth-century practitioners' investments in reading, in the capacity of readers to imagine differently the boundaries that allow movement and rebirth.

Irigaray's method is to inhabit the philosophical both in the feminine and in the poetic. My own is self-evidently more humble – and has had to be, since it works with that crumbling structure which is the aesthetic and the textual, a structure that provokes an indefinite range of readings, and which is for that very reason deprived of a secure place where its effects might be legitimized. (What *is* the point of an Opera House? or the street-art in front of one?) Its only power is to stage the absence of its own supremacy, and in that way to suspend itself between disruption of a rich, but escape-proof past and suspicion of such an exhibitionist pretension to the *tabula rasa*.

A humanity of forms, then: speculative, but resigned. A manufactured one as well, closely guarding, rhetorically re-inventing its immunity to place and position. But what might be thought of as a purely symptomatic type of resistance allows various other effects to be staged, and an active resistance to them to be constructed. I am thinking among others of the effects of gender, race, ideology – all loves that in my idiom in this book have scarcely dared breathe their name. But a textualised approach to these issues characteristic of writers from Breton to Cixous and from Benjamin to Barthes reveals at the very least the all-pervasiveness and the insidiousness of the implications involved. That is the open but unspoken secret of plurality, a secret, lost in its speaking, of an elusive signified which the notional primacy of the signifier fails to see beyond. The signifier is a vulnerable indicator, colluding with the silencing of its own messages of signifying dismemberment and discursive

relativity. For any sensation or fleeting perception is, after all, also the idea of it. Plurality, the assumption of a range of readings attached to any artefact tagged as text, is made of such collusion. And yet on the basis of its own vulnerability, the signifier showers readers with further indicators of the high-stake dramas in which it is involved, and which might produce still further ways of staging this rather sickeningly familiar set of questions. Does sense merely engulf? Are forms merely imaginary? Do art and thought have the power only to oil the wheels of permissable symbolic dialogue and the domination that lurks there? Does the capacity to think form, to think the relative, to rediscover the other words breathing in every word undermine itself at every turn?

A textual approach to such questions is volatile, humble and humbling. I have tried to show Barthes's admiring disquiet, his horrified fascination with unpredictable passages from signifying bittiness to imaginary completion and impregnability. Reading the effects of the signifier in Surrealist practice has allowed me to show its place in the history of the ways this anxiety has been engaged with in writing and painting this century in France. Surrealist interference in signifying relations and the other relations they involve – gendered as well as ideological ones – is suspended between an imaginary, magical mobility and a staging of this specious magic. The scope of the signifier seems to narrow to two options at the hands of Desnos and Magritte: alienation and fantasies of escape. Signifying potential is taken over by the equally protean activity of the symptom; a sense of the plural in perceptual or affective response gives way to an implacable determinism; the reign of the mirror is reaffirmed, tyranny and the asphyxiation of difference find new homes.

For the unconscious which Magritte 'knows' is not the one of surface shocks or the alarming bizarreness of the dream narrative, nor its alternately ludic and horrifying free play with material conditions; nor even the unconscious of trap-doors and abysses opened out in the floor boards of language. But the indefinite, multiform, protean, malleable, insidious, deceptive, omnipotent and impotent, energised and victimised, sterile, kaleidoscopic and violent energy with which the ego protects its domains. This is where Magritte reinvents invention, its limitations and its honesty.

Elsewhere, in a parallel space to that of Surrealism, Kafka's figure of Josef K and then of K exemplifies with special poignancy the collusion of the desire for a place in a mechanism with the resistance to being allotted such a place. The pleasures of meaning, it would seem, will always win through over the pleasures of excess, which in that way at least are displayed for the pointless utopia they offer. If not transgression, then a more resigned pursuit of mobility within the tense places of sense and sensation, orthodoxy and improvisation returns to the critical encounter. Tentatively, for the sake of

argument almost, or of a relationship with you, I have sought with many others to turn involvement with texts into a site where narcissism might be transformed into generosity.

In the readings I have journeyed through here, the social encounter is presented as already absorbed, embodied without being accepted. Sexual and cultural identity would be complacent and enclosed if not for the battles that articulate them – those war zones written in the minutiae of habit and impulse just as much as in public conflict and spectacle. Breath-taking in their magnificence but also in their violence, I have found that these impulses turned spectacle are not just static but temporal, not entrenched but collapsing, not transcendent but decaying. But there is no alternative space either to the abject tyranny depicted, say, in Fautrier's *Les Otages*. A beyond to violence is pursued from within and not without; neither in resignation to corruption and corruptibility nor in a suppression of them.

Les Paravents, like *Les Otages* and Duras's *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*, exudes the traces of unhealing, mobile wounds made in words and the dire effects of racial and sexual exclusion. Duras's text is uncompromisingly intimate, ingraining the private with public marks of sexual – and in other texts, racial – resentment and violence. Perhaps this is the source of the notorious popularity of Duras's writing – its ability to steep its readers in ancestral ghosts, attractions and models, in unguent and treacherous forms that indicate what we are and cannot have, that tell the stories of our silences, and then flip over and place us in the public space of other ideas, shapes and bodies.

The idiom of *Les Paravents*, written some twenty years earlier, is a noisier one. It is made of continual disappointment, of intimate longing or ambition for bodies and wrap-around sensations rapidly returned to the common spaces of consumption and exploitation. Alienation and attraction speak in the same forked tongues, creativity and despair meet in the same dark corners and shriek the same guffaws. Colonialist oppression prolonged by the Algerian war appears none the less violent for being represented, painted, acted out, performed and decorated: the wounds it inflicts on both perpetrators and victims form a language that is boundless and shaped, orgasmic and sterile, historical, subjective, unpredictable. Might such a language suggest the language of community, or the language of its disintegration – or both in the same breath, or in the same image, either side of a dissolving screen?

But if democracy is to be given back its space in the mind and in the senses, this cannot be at the expense of society, of place and context, of all the codes, idiolects and the other legion specificities that demand the right to voice and form at any one moment. The image and its imaginary forces cannot take us beyond place; but then neither can the signifier keep us

securely within it, comfortably within the embrace of others and the unlevel playing fields of exchange. If the image would have us whole and dominant, its decay would immerse us in the acceptance of others and of our place in others, and in mortality. Such is the history I have tried to bear witness to in this book of the development of modernist or avant-gardist forms in twentieth-century France. More than an orthodox downgrading of the image at the hands of a self-validating, all-validating anti-illusionism, this history has offered me an education in the unlearnable: in the relativity in which Narcissus is immersed in exchange for a body; in the grandness of the aspiration to set violence aside; and in the humility provoked by the repeated, multi-levelled failures of this ambition. A lesson in the equality of collapse, a willed collapse, or if not willed then imagined, but not a pessimistic one. This is not a history that can be unearthed in terms of a strict chronology; it folds and unfurls in the recesses of emotion and memory as much as in the grand or catastrophic gestures of public life, conflict and discourse. It is this *imagined* sense of a culturalised, specified, intimate and dispersed temporality that I have tried in this book both to revere and to foster.

Two final farewell gestures. The first to Baudelaire, whose writing continues to dominate my own and many others' understanding of modernisms high and low; and 'La Mort des amants' in particular, the death of the lovers. Orgasm has passed, the lovers have separated, only an Angel remains, an indulgently and inveterately material one. 'He' is now the only being able to imagine what is now not there. For this very reason, he needs us to imagine with him, to live with the impossibility of his being there, and to imagine him visualising what is not there. There *is* nothing there. Something may begin.

My last allegorical farewell is addressed at a film: *Trois couleurs: rouge*, the last in Kieślowski's trilogy, his testimony to the idea of revolution, *Bleu, blanc, rouge*. A man at a red traffic light is captivated by an enormous red poster with the profile of a woman's face. The advertised product is irrelevant to the impact produced both on that viewer and on me, the viewer of the video. Mythical, symbolic, subjective constructions mingle with each other and with others, are lost in the imagining of the new, and of an arrested past in the form on an arresting present.

But the image is not free from the advertised product, which is chewing gum – pointless in the extreme, at one level; and it remains that, but also becomes sinister as viewers learn that someone has used chewing gum to block up the key-hole to the model's flat. Voyeurism emerges as nonetheless all-pervasive or violent for being frustrated. Moreover, viewer and model are in fact known to each other; the painfully slow awareness I, at least, come to of this relation signals implacable legality, systematic exchange for profit, the herding of reading into ownership. But that system is shown, is imagined collapsing in a catastrophe familiar to all, in a language of catastrophe that all

share and are horrified by: the sinking of the Zeebrugge ferry in 1993. The small group of heroes and heroines of Kieślowski's trilogy, victims and perpetrators all of sexual violence and Oedipal capitalism, are the sole survivors of this decay in the edifice that has produced them – filmic cyphers all, made of life, love and pain. What we have of ourselves is given to us and taken away in reading, that inadequate measure of events and of the subjectivities that are swamped by them. But still, in our minds, something may now begin.