To write reflectively about modernity leads to problems that put the usefulness of the term into question, especially as it applies, or fails to apply, to literature. There may well be an inherent contradiction between modernity, which is a way of acting and behaving, and such terms as "reflection" or "ideas" that play an important part in literature and history. The spontaneity of being modern conflicts with the claim to think and write about modernity; it is not at all certain that literature and modernity are in any way compatible concepts. Yet we all speak readily about modern literature and even use this term as a device for historical periodization, with the same apparent unawareness that history and modernity may well be even more incompatible than literature and modernity. The innocuous-sounding title of this paper may therefore contain no less than two logical absurdities—a most inauspicious beginning.

The term "modernity" reappears with increasing frequency and seems again to have become an issue not only as an ideological weapon, but as a theoretical problem as well. It may even be one of the ways by means of which the link between literary theory and literary praxis is being partly restored. At other moments in history, the topic "modernity" might be used just as an attempt at self-definition, as a way of diagnosing one's own present. This can happen during periods of considerable inventiveness, periods that seem, looking back, to have been unusually productive. At such actual or imaginary times, modernity would not be a value in itself, but would designate a set of values that exist independently of their modernity: Renaissance art is not admired because it may have been, at a certain moment, a distinctively "modern" form of art. We do not feel this way about the present, perhaps because such self-assurance can exist only retrospectively. It would be a hopeless task to try to
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define descriptively the elusive pattern of our own literary modernity; we draw nearer to the problem, however, by asking how modernity can, in itself, become an issue and why this issue seems to be raised with particular urgency with regard to literature or, even more specifically, with regard to theoretical speculations about literature.

That this is indeed the case can be easily verified in Europe as well as in the United States. It is particularly conspicuous, for example, in Germany where, after being banned for political reasons, the term modernity now receives a strong positive value-emphasis and has of late been much in evidence as a battle cry as well as a serious topic of investigation. The same is true in France and in the United States, perhaps most clearly in the renewed interest shown in the transfer of methods derived from the social sciences to literary studies.

Not so long ago, a concern with modernity would in all likelihood have coincided with a commitment to avant-garde movements such as dada, surrealism, or expressionism. The term would have appeared in manifestoes and proclamations, not in learned articles or international colloquia. But this does not mean that we can divide the twentieth century into two parts: a "creative" part that was actually modern, and a "reflective" or "critical" part that feeds on this modernity in the manner of a parasite, with active modernity replaced by theorizing about the modern. Certain forces that could legitimately be called modern and that were at work in lyric poetry, the novel, and the theater have also now become operative in the field of literary theory and criticism. The gap between the manifestoes and the learned articles has narrowed to the point where some manifestoes are quite learned and some articles—though by no means all—are quite provocative. This development has by itself complicated and changed the texture of our literary modernity a great deal and brought to the fore difficulties inherent in the term itself as soon as it is used historically or reflectively. It is perhaps somewhat disconcerting to learn that our usage of the word goes back to the late fifth century of our era and that there is nothing modern about the concept of modernity. It is even more disturbing to discover the host of complications that beset one as soon as a conceptual definition of the term is attempted, especially with regard to literature. One is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern.

It is this complication I would like to explore with the help of
some examples that are not necessarily taken from our immediate present. They should illuminate the problematic structure of a concept that, like all concepts that are in essence temporal, acquires a particularly rich complexity when it is made to refer to events that are in essence linguistic. I will be less concerned with a description of our own modernity than with the challenge to the methods or the possibility of literary history that the concept implies.

Among the various antonyms that come to mind as possible opposites for “modernity”—a variety which is itself symptomatic of the complexity of the term—none is more fruitful than “history.” “Modern” can be used in opposition to “traditional” or even to “classical.” For some French and American contemporaries, “modern” could even mean the opposite of “romantic,” a usage that would be harder to conceive for some specialists of German literature. Antimodernists such as Emil Staiger do not hesitate to see the sources of a modernism they deplore in the Frühromantik of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, and the lively quarrel now taking place in Germany is still focused on the early nineteenth-century tensions between Weimar and Jena. But each of these antonyms—ancient, traditional, classical, and romantic—would embroil us in qualifications and discriminations that are, in fact, superficial matters of geographical and historical contingency. We will reach further if we try to think through the latent opposition between “modern” and “historical,” and this will also bring us closest to the contemporary version of the problem.

The vested interest that academics have in the value of history makes it difficult to put the term seriously into question. Only an exceptionally talented and perhaps eccentric member of the profession could undertake this task with sufficient energy to make it effective, and even then it is likely to be accompanied by the violence that surrounds passion and rebellion. One of the most striking instances of such a rebellion occurred when Nietzsche, then a young philologist who had been treated quite generously by the academic establishment, turned violently against the traditional foundations of his own discipline in a polemical essay entitled “Of the Use and Misuse of History for Life” (“Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben”). The text is a good example of the complications that ensue when a genuine impulse toward modernity collides with the demands of a historical consciousness or of a culture based on the disciplines of history. It can serve as an
introduction to the more delicate problems that arise when modernity is applied more specifically to literature.

It is not at once clear that Nietzsche is concerned with a conflict between modernity and history in his Second Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung. That history is being challenged in a fundamental way is obvious from the start, but it is not obvious that this happens in the name of modernity. The term “modern” most frequently appears in the text with negative connotations as descriptive of the way in which Nietzsche considers his contemporaries to be corrupted and enfeebled by an excessive interest in the past. As opposed to the Greeks, Nietzsche’s “moderns” escape from the issues of the present, which they are too weak and sterile to confront, into the sheltering inwardness that history can provide, but that bears no relation to actual existence. History and modernity seem to go hand in hand and jointly fall prey to Nietzsche’s cultural criticism. Used in this sense, modernity is merely a descriptive term that designates a certain state of mind Nietzsche considers prevalent among the Germans of his time. A much more dynamic concept of modernity, far-reaching enough to serve as a first definition, appears in what is here directly being opposed to history, namely what Nietzsche calls “life.”

“Life” is conceived not just in biological but in temporal terms as the ability to forget whatever precedes a present situation. Like most opponents of Rousseau in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche’s thought follows purely Rousseauistic patterns; the text starts with a contrasting parallel between nature and culture that stems directly from the Second Discourse on the Origins of Inequality. The restlessness of human society, in contrast to the placid state of nature of the animal herd, is diagnosed as man’s inability to forget the past.

[Man] wonders about himself, about his inability [to learn] to forget, and about his tendency to remain tied to the past: No matter how far and how swiftly he runs, the chain runs with him . . . Man says “I remember,” and envies the animal that forgets at once, and watches each moment die, disappear in night and mist, and disappear forever. Thus the animal lives unhistorically: It hides nothing and coincides at all moments exactly with that what it is; it is bound to be truthful at all times, unable to be anything else.2

This ability to forget and to live without historical awareness exists not only on an animal level. Since “life” has an ontological as well as a biological meaning, the condition of animality persists as a constitutive part of man. Not only are there moments when it
governs his actions, but these are also the moments when he re-
establishes contact with his spontaneity and allows his truly human
nature to assert itself.

We saw that the animal, which is truly unhistorical and lives confined
within a horizon almost without extension, exists in a relative state of
happiness: We will therefore have to consider the ability to experience
life in a nonhistorical way as the most important and most original of
experiences, as the foundation on which right, health, greatness, and
anything truly human can be erected.

Moments of genuine humanity thus are moments at which all
anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute
forgetting. Although such a radical rejection of history may be
illusory or unfair to the achievements of the past, it nevertheless
remains justified as necessary to the fulfillment of our human
destiny and as the condition for action.

As the man who acts must, according to Goethe, be without a conscience,
he must also be without knowledge; he forgets everything in order to
be able to do something; he is unfair toward what lies behind and
knows only one right, the right of what is now coming into being as the
result of his own action.

We are touching here upon the radical impulse that stands behind
all genuine modernity when it is not merely a descriptive syn-
onym for the contemporaneous or for a passing fashion. Fashion
(mode) can sometimes be only what remains of modernity after the
impulse has subsided, as soon—and this can be almost at once—as
it has changed from being an incandescent point in time into a
reproducible cliché, all that remains of an invention that has lost the
desire that produced it. Fashion is like the ashes left behind by the
uniquely shaped flames of the fire, the trace alone revealing that a
fire actually took place. But Nietzsche’s ruthless forgetting, the
blindness with which he throws himself into an action lightened of
all previous experience, captures the authentic spirit of modernity. It
is the tone of Rimbaud when he declares that he has no antecedents
whatever in the history of France, that all one has to expect from
poets is “du nouveau” and that one must be “absolutely modern”; it
is the tone of Antonin Artaud when he asserts that “la poésie écrite
vaut une fois et ensuite qu’on la détruire. Que les poètes morts
laissent la place aux autres . . . on doit en finir avec les chefs-
d’oeuvres.” Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out
whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that
could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure. This combined interplay of a deliberate forgetting with an action that is also a new origin reaches the full power of the idea of modernity. Thus defined, modernity and history are diametrically opposed to each other in Nietzsche's text. Nor is there any doubt as to his commitment to modernity, the only way to reach the meta-historical realm in which the rhythm of one's existence coincides with that of the eternal return. Yet the shrill grandiloquence of the tone may make one suspect that the issue is not so simple as it may at first appear.

Of course, within the polemical circumstances in which it was written, the essay has to overstate the case against history and to aim beyond its target in the hope of reaching it. This tactic is less interesting, however, than the question of whether Nietzsche can free his own thought from historical prerogatives, whether his own text can approach the condition of modernity it advocates. From the start, the intoxication with the history-transcending life-process is counterbalanced by a deeply pessimistic wisdom that remains rooted in a sense of historical causality, although it reverses the movement of history from one of development to one of regression. Human "existence," we are told near the beginning of the essay, "is an uninterruptedly pastness that lives from its own denial and destruction, from its own contradictions." ("Das Dasein ist nur ein ununterbrochenes Gewesensein, ein Ding, das davon lebt, sich selbst zu verneinen und zu verzerren, sich selbst zu widersprechen.""") This description of life as a constant regression has nothing to do with cultural errors, such as the excess of historical disciplines in contemporary education against which the essay polemicizes, but lies much deeper in the nature of things, beyond the reach of culture. It is a temporal experience of human mutability, historical in the deepest sense of the term in that it implies the necessary experience of any present as a passing experience that makes the past irrevocable and unforgettable because it is inseparable from any present or future. Keats gained access to the same awareness when, in The Fall of Hyperion, he contemplated in the fallen Saturn the past as a foreknowledge of his own mortal future:

Without stay or prop  
But my own weak mortality, I bore  
The load of this eternal quietude,  
The unchanging gloom . . .

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Modernity invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present. Nietzsche’s text leads him irrevocably to this discovery, perhaps most strikingly (because most implicitly), when he comes close to describing his own function as a critical historian and discovers that the rejection of the past is not so much an act of forgetting as an act of critical judgment directed against himself.

[The critical student of the past] must possess the strength, and must at times apply this strength, to the destruction and dissolution of the past in order to be able to live. He achieves this by calling this past into court, putting it under indictment, and finally condemning it; any past, however, deserves to be condemned, for such is the condition of human affairs that they are ruled by violence and weakness. . . . “It takes a great deal of strength to be able to live and forget to what extent life and injustice go together.” . . . But this very life that has to forget must also at times be able to stop forgetting; then it will become clear how illegitimate the existence of something, of a privilege, a caste, or a dynasty actually is, and how much it deserves to be destroyed. Then the past is judged critically, attacked at its very roots with a sharp knife, and brutally cut down, regardless of established pieties. This is always a dangerous process, dangerous for life itself. Men and eras that serve life in this manner, by judging and destroying the past, are always dangerous and endangered. For we are inevitably the result of earlier generations and thus the result of their mistakes, their passions and aberrations, even of their crimes; it is not possible to loosen oneself entirely from this chain. . . . Afterwards, we try to give ourselves a new past from which we should have liked to descend instead of the past from which we actually descended. But this is also dangerous, because it is so difficult to trace the limit of one’s denial of the past, and because the newly invented nature is likely to be weaker than the previous one. . . .”

The parricidal imagery of the passage, the weaker son condemning and killing the stronger father, reaches the inherent paradox of the denial of history implied in modernity.

As soon as modernism becomes conscious of its own strategies—and it cannot fail to do so if it is justified, as in this text, in the name of a concern for the future—it discovers itself to be a generative power that not only engenders history, but is part of a generative scheme that extends far back into the past. The image of the chain, to which Nietzsche instinctively resorts when he speaks of history, reveals this very clearly. Considered as a principle of life, modernity becomes a principle of origination and turns at once into a generative power that is itself historical. It becomes impossible to over-

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come history in the name of life or to forget the past in the name of modernity, because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny. Nietzsche finds it impossible to escape from history, and he finally has to bring the two incompatibles, history and modernity (now using the term in the full sense of a radical renewal), together in a paradox that cannot be resolved, an aporia that comes very close to describing the predicament of our own present modernity:

For the impulse that stands behind our history-oriented education—in radical inner contradiction to the spirit of a “new time” or a “modern spirit”—must in turn be understood historically; history itself must resolve the problem of history, historical knowledge must turn its weapon against itself—this threefold “must” is the imperative of the “new times,” if they are to achieve something truly new, powerful, life-giving, and original.8

Only through history is history conquered; modernity now appears as the horizon of a historical process that has to remain a gamble. Nietzsche sees no assurance that his own reflective and historical attempt achieves any genuine change; he realizes that his text itself can be nothing but another historical document,9 and finally he has to delegate the power of renewal and modernity to a mythical entity called “youth” to which he can only recommend the effort of self-knowledge that has brought him to his own abdication.

The bad faith implied in advocating self-knowledge to a younger generation, while demanding from this generation that it act blindly, out of a self-forgetting that one is unwilling or unable to achieve oneself, forms a pattern all too familiar in our own experience to need comment. In this way Nietzsche, at this early point in his career, copes with a paradox that his thought has revealed with impressive clarity: Modernity and history relate to each other in a curiously contradictory way that goes beyond antithesis or opposition. If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process. Nietzsche offers no real escape out of a predicament in which we readily recognize the mood of our own modernity. Modernity and history seem condemned to being linked together in a self-destroying union that threatens the survival of both.

If we see in this paradoxical condition a diagnosis of our own
modernity, then literature has always been essentially modern. Nietzsche was speaking of life and of culture in general, of modernity and history as they appear in all human enterprises in the most general sense possible. The problem becomes more intricate when it is restricted to literature. Here we are dealing with an activity that necessarily contains, within its own specificity, the very contradiction that Nietzsche discovered at the endpoint of his rebellion against a historically minded culture. Regardless of historical or cultural conditions, beyond the reach of educational or moral imperatives, the modernity of literature confronts us at all times with an unsolvable paradox. On the one hand, literature has a constitutive affinity with action, with the unmediated, free act that knows no past; some of the impatience of Rimbaud or Artaud echoes in all literary texts, no matter how serene and detached they may seem. The historian, in his function as historian, can remain quite remote from the collective acts he records; his language and the events that the language denotes are clearly distinct entities. But the writer’s language is to some degree the product of his own action; he is both the historian and the agent of his own language. The ambivalence of writing is such that it can be considered both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide. As such, it both affirms and denies its own nature or specificity. Unlike the historian, the writer remains so closely involved with action that he can never free himself of the temptation to destroy whatever stands between him and his deed, especially the temporal distance that makes him dependent on an earlier past. The appeal of modernity haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods—in the obsession with a tabula rasa, with new beginnings—that finds recurrent expression in all forms of writing. No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness and has to be included in a definition of the specificity of literature.

The manner in which this specificity asserts itself, however, the form of its actual manifestation, is curiously oblique and confusing. Often in the course of literary history writers openly assert their commitment to modernity thus conceived. Yet whenever this happens, a curious logic that seems almost uncontrolled, a necessity inherent in the nature of the problem rather than in the will of the writer, directs their utterance away from their avowed
purpose. Assertions of literary modernity often end up by putting the possibility of being modern seriously into question. But precisely because this discovery goes against an original commitment that cannot simply be dismissed as erroneous, it never gets stated outright, but hides instead behind rhetorical devices of language that disguise and distort what the writer is actually saying, perhaps in contrast to what he meant to say. Hence the need for the interpreter of such texts to respond to levels of meaning not immediately obvious. The very presence of such complexities indicates the existence of a special problem: How is it that a specific and important feature of a literary consciousness, its desire for modernity, seems to lead outside literature into something that no longer shares this specificity, thus forcing the writer to undermine his own assertions in order to remain faithful to his vocation?

It is time to clarify what we are trying to convey with some examples taken from texts that openly plead the cause of modernity. Many, but by no means all, of these texts are written by people who stand outside literature from the start, either because they instinctively tend toward the interpretative distance of the historian, or because they incline toward a form of action no longer linked to language. During the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, the debate between a traditional conception of literature and modernity that took place in France near the end of the seventeenth century and that is still considered by some as the starting point of a "modern" sense of history, it is striking that the modern camp not only contained men of slighter literary talent, but that their arguments against classical literature were often simply against literature as such. The nature of the debate forced the participants to make comparative critical evaluations of ancient versus contemporary writing; it obliged them to offer something resembling readings of passages in Homer, Pindar, or Theocritus. Although no one covered himself with critical glory in the performance of this task—mainly because the powerful imperative of decorum (bienséance) tends to become a particularly opaque screen that stands between the antique text and the classical reading—the partisans of the Ancients still performed a great deal better than the pro-moderns. If one compares the remarks of a "moderne" such as Charles Perrault on Homer or his application in 1688 of seventeenth-century bienséance to Hellenic texts in Parallèle des anciens et des modernes with Boileau's reply in Réflexions critiques sur quelques passages du rhéteur Longin of 1964, it

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then becomes clear that the "anciens" had a notion of decorum that remained in much closer contact with literature, including its constitutive impulse toward literary modernity, than did the "modernes." This fact undoubtedly strengthens, in the long run, the cause of the moderns, despite their own critical shortcomings, but the point is precisely that a partisan and deliberately pro-modern stance is much more easily taken by someone devoid of literary sensitivity than by a genuine writer. Literature, which is inconceivable without a passion for modernity, also seems to oppose from the inside a subtle resistance to this passion.

Thus we find in the same period a detached and ironical mind like that of the early Fontenelle openly taking the side of the moderns in asserting that "nothing stands so firmly in the way of progress, nothing restricts the mind so effectively as an excessive admiration for the Ancients."13 Having to demystify the merit of invention and origin on which the superiority of the Ancients is founded—and which, in fact, roots their merit in their genuine modernity—Fontenelle himself becomes entertainingly inventive in his assertion that the prestige of so-called origins is merely an illusion created by the distance separating us from a remote past. At the same time he expresses the mock-anxious fear that our own progressing rationality will prevent us from benefiting, in the eyes of future generations, from the favorable prejudice we were silly enough to bestow on the Greeks and the Romans.

En vertu de ces compensations, nous pouvons espérer qu'on nous admirera avec excès dans les siècles à venir, pour nous payer du peu de cas que l'on fait aujourd'hui de nous dans le nôtre. On s'évertuera à trouver dans nos ouvrages des beautés que nous n'avons point prétendu y mettre; telle faute incontestable et dont l'auteur conviendrait lui-même aujourd'hui trouvera des défenseurs d'un courage invincible; et Dieu sait avec quel mépris on traitera en comparaison de nous, les beaux esprits de ces temps-là, qui pourront bien être des américains. C'est ainsi que le même préjugé nous abaisse dans un temps, pour nous élever dans un autre, c'est ainsi qu'on en est la victime et puis la divinité; jeu assez plaisant à considérer avec des yeux indifférents.

The same playful indifference prompts Fontenelle to add the remark:

Mais il y a toutes les apparences du monde que la raison se perfectionnera, et que l'on se désabusera généralement du préjugé grossier de l'Antiquité. Peut-être ne durera-t-il pas encore longtemps! peut-être à l'heure qu'il est admirons-nous les Anciens en pure perte, et sans devoir jamais être admiré en cette qualité-là. Ce serait un peu fâcheux.14
Fontenelle’s historical irony is far from being unliterary, but if taken at face value it stands at the very opposite pole of the impulse toward action without which literature would not be what it is. Nietzsche admired Fontenelle, but it must have been as an apollinian anti-self, for nothing is more remote from the spirit of modernity than Fontenelle’s perfectibilité, a kind of statistical, quantitative balance between right and wrong, a process of trial-by-chance that may perhaps lead to certain rules by means of which aberrations could be prevented in the future. In the name of perfectibilité, he can reduce critical norms to a set of mechanical rules and assert, with only a trace of irony, that literature progressed faster than science because the imagination obeys a smaller number of easier rules than does reason. He can easily dismiss poetry and the arts as “unimportant,” since he pretends to have moved so far away from their concerns. His stance is that of the objective, scientific historian. Even if taken seriously, this stance would engage him in a task of interpretation closer to literature than that of Charles Perrault, for example, who has to resort to the military and imperial achievements of his age to find instances of the superiority of the moderns. That such a type of modernism leads outside literature is clear enough. The topos of the anti-literary, technological man as an incarnation of modernity is recurrent among the idées reçues of the nineteenth century and symptomatic of the alacrity with which modernity welcomes the opportunity to abandon literature altogether. The opposite temptation toward a purely detached interpretation, of which we find an ironic version in Fontenelle, also reveals the inherent trend to draw away from the literary. Perrault’s committed, as well as Fontenelle’s detached, modernism both lead away from literary understanding.

Our examples may have been one-sided, however, since we were dealing with nonliterary figures. More revealing is the case of writers whose proximity to literature is beyond dispute and who find themselves, in true accordance with their literary vocation, defenders of modernity—not just in the choice of their themes and settings, but as representative of a fundamental attitude of mind. The poetry of Baudelaire, as well as his plea for modernity in several critical texts, would be a good case in point.

As seen in the famous essay on Constantin Guys, “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” Baudelaire’s conception of modernity is very close to that of Nietzsche in his second Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung.
It stems from an acute sense of the present as a constitutive element of all esthetic experience:

Le plaisir que nous retirons de la représentation du présent tient non seulement à la beauté dont il peut être revêtu, mais aussi à sa qualité essentielle de présent.\(^{15}\)

The paradox of the problem is potentially contained in the formula “représentation du présent,” which combines a repetitive with an instantaneous pattern without apparent awareness of the incompatibility. Yet this latent tension governs the development of the entire essay. Baudelaire remains faithful throughout to the seduction of the present; any temporal awareness is so closely tied for him to the present moment that memory comes to apply more naturally to the present than it does to the past:

Malheur à celui qui étudie dans l’antique autre chose que l’art pur, la logique, la méthode générale ! Pour s’y trop plonger, il perd la mémoire du présent; il abdique la valeur et les privilèges fournis par la circonstance; car presque toute notre originalité vient de l’estampille que le temps imprime à nos sensations.\(^{16}\)

The same temporal ambivalence prompts Baudelaire to couple any evocation of the present with terms such as “représentation,” “mémoire,” or even “temps,” all opening perspectives of distance and difference within the apparent uniqueness of the instant. Yet his modernity too, like Nietzsche’s, is a forgetting or a suppression of anteriority: The human figures that epitomize modernity are defined by experiences such as childhood or convalescence, a freshness of perception that results from a slate wiped clear, from the absence of a past that has not yet had time to tarnish the immediacy of perception (although what is thus freshly discovered prefigures the end of this very freshness), of a past that, in the case of convalescence, is so threatening that it has to be forgotten.

All these experiences of immediacy coupled with their implicit negation, strive to combine the openness and freedom of a present severed from all other temporal dimensions, the weight of the past as well as the concern with a future, with a sense of totality and completeness that could not be achieved if a more extended awareness of time were not also involved. Thus we find Constantin Guys, who is made to serve as a kind of emblem for the poetic mind, to be a curious synthesis of a man of action (that is, a man of the moment, severed from past and future) with an observer and recorder of moments that are necessarily combined within a larger
totality. Like the photographer or reporter of today, he has to be present at the battles and the murders of the world, not to inform, but to freeze what is most transient and ephemeral into a recorded image. Constantin Guys, before being an artist, has to be *homme du monde*, driven by curiosity and "always, spiritually, in the state of mind of the convalescent." The description of his technique offers perhaps the best formulation of this ideal combination of the instantaneous with a completed whole, of pure fluid movement with form—a combination that would achieve a reconciliation between the impulse toward modernity and the demand of the work of art to achieve duration. The painting remains steadily in motion and exists in the open, improvised manner of a sketch that is like a constant new beginning. The final closing of the form, constantly postponed, occurs so swiftly and suddenly that it hides its dependence on previous moments in its own precipitous instantaneous: The entire process tries to outrun time, to achieve a swiftness that would transcend the latent opposition between action and form.

Ainsi, dans l’exécution de M. G. se montrent deux choses: l’une, une contention de mémoire résurrectioniste, évocatrice, une mémoire qui dit à chaque chose: "Lazare, lève-toi!"; l’autre, un feu, une ivresse de crayon, de pinceau, ressemblant presque à une fureur. C’est la peur de n’aller pas assez vite, de laisser échapper le fantôme avant que la synthèse n’en soit extraite et saisie... M. G. commence par de légères indications au crayon, qui ne marquent guère que la place que les objets doivent tenir dans l’espace. Les plans principaux sont indiqués ensuite... Au dernier moment, le contour des objets est définitivement cerné par de l’encre... Cette méthode si simple et presque élémentaire... a cet incomparable avantage qu’à n’importe quel point de son progrès, chaque dessin a l’air suffisamment fini; vous nommerez cela une ébauche si vous voulez, mais ébauche parfaite.\(^{17}\)

That Baudelaire has to refer to this synthesis as a "fantôme" is another instance of the rigor that forces him to double any assertion by a qualifying use of language that puts it at once into question. The Constantin Guys of the essay is himself a phantom, bearing some resemblance to the actual painter, but differing from him in being the fictional achievement of what existed only potentially in the "real" man. Even if we consider the character in the essay to be a mediator used to formulate the prospective vision of Baudelaire’s own work, we can still witness in this vision a similar disincarnation and reduction of meaning. At first, in the enumeration of the themes that the painter (or writer) will select, we again find the temptation of modernity to move outside art, its nostalgia...
for the immediacy, the facticity of entities that are in contact with the present and illustrate the heroic ability to ignore or to forget that this present contains the prospective self-knowledge of its end. The figure chosen can be more or less close to being aware of this: It can be the mere surface, the outer garment of the present, the unwitting defiance of death in the soldier's colorful coat, or it can be the philosophically conscious sense of time of the dandy. In each case, however, the "subject" Baudelaire chose for a theme is preferred because it exists in the facticity, in the modernity, of a present that is ruled by experiences that lie outside language and escape from the successive temporality, the duration involved in writing. Baudelaire states clearly that the attraction of a writer toward his theme—which is also the attraction toward an action, a modernity, and an autonomous meaning that would exist outside the realm of language—is primarily an attraction to what is not art. The statement occurs with reference to the most anonymous and shapeless "theme" of all, that of the crowd: "C'est un moi insatiable de non-moi . . ." If one remembers that this "moi" designates, in the metaphor of a subject, the specificity of literature, then this specificity is defined by its inability to remain constant to its own specificity.

This, at least, corresponds to the first moment of a certain mode of being, called literature. It soon appears that literature is an entity that exists not as a single moment of self-denial, but as a plurality of moments that can, if one wishes, be represented—but this is a mere representation—as a succession of moments or a duration. In other words, literature can be represented as a movement and is, in essence, the fictional narration of this movement. After the initial moment of flight away from its own specificity, a moment of return follows that leads literature back to what it is—but we must bear in mind that terms such as "after" and "follows" do not designate actual moments in a diachrony, but are used purely as metaphors of duration. Baudelaire's text illustrates this return, this reprise, with striking clarity. The "moi insatiable de non-moi . . ." has been moving toward a series of "themes" that reveal the impatience with which it tries to move away from its own center. These themes become less and less concrete and substantial, however, although they are being evoked with increasing realism and mimetic rigor in the description of their surfaces. The more realistic and pictorial they become, the more abstract they are, the slighter the residue of meaning that would exist outside their specificity as
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mere language and mere significant. The last theme that Baudelaire evokes, that of the carriages, has nothing whatever to do with the facticity of the carriage—although Baudelaire insists that in the paintings by Constantin Guys “toute [la] carrosserie est parfaitement orthodoxe; chaque partie est à sa place et rien n’est à reprendre.” The substantial, thematic meaning of the carriage as such, however, has disappeared:

Dans quelque attitude qu’elle soit jetée, avec quelque allure qu’elle soit lancée, une voiture, comme un vaisseau, emprunte au mouvement une grâce mystérieuse et complexe très difficile à sténographier. Le plaisir que l’œil de l’artiste en reçoit est tiré, ce semble, de la série de figures géométriques que cet objet, déjà si compliqué, engendre successivement et rapidement dans l’espace.

What is here being stenographed is the movement by which, in apparent and metaphorical succession, literature first moves away from itself and then returns. All that remains of the theme is a mere outline, less than a sketch, a time-arabesque rather than a figure. The carriage has been allegorized into nothingness and exists as the purely temporal vibration of a successive movement that has only linguistic existence—for nothing is more radically metaphorical than the expression “figures géométriques” that Baudelaire is compelled to use to make himself understood. But that he wants to be understood, and not misunderstood in the belief that this geometry would have recourse to anything that is not language, is clear from its implied identification with a mode of writing. The stenos in the word stenography, meaning narrow, could be used to designate the confinement of literature within its own boundaries, its dependence on duration and repetition that Baudelaire experienced as a curse. But the fact that the word designates a form of writing indicates the compulsion to return to a literary mode of being, as a form of language that knows itself to be mere repetition, mere fiction and allegory, forever unable to participate in the spontaneity of action or modernity.

The movement of this text—that could be shown to parallel the development of Baudelaire’s poetry as it moves from the sensory richness of the earlier poems to their gradual allegorization in the prose versions of the Spleen de Paris—recurs with various degrees of explicitness in all writers and measures the legitimacy of their claim to be called writers. Modernity turns out to be indeed one of the concepts by means of which the distinctive nature of literature can be revealed in all its intricacy. No wonder it had to become
a central issue in critical discussions and a source of torment to writers who have to confront it as a challenge to their vocation. They can neither accept nor reject it with good conscience. When they assert their own modernity, they are bound to discover their dependence on similar assertions made by their literary predecessors; their claim to being a new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made. As soon as Baudelaire has to replace the single instant of invention, conceived as an act, by a successive movement that involves at least two distinct moments, he enters into a world that assumes the depths and complications of an articulated time, an interdependence between past and future that prevents any present from ever coming into being.

The more radical the rejection of anything that came before, the greater the dependence on the past. Antonin Artaud can go to the extreme of rejecting all forms of theatrical art prior to his own; in his own work, he can demand the destruction of any form of written text—he nevertheless finally has to ground his own vision in examples such as the Balinese theater, the least modern, the most text-frozen type of theater conceivable. And he has to do so with full knowledge that he thus destroys his own project, with the hatred of the traitor for the camp that he has chosen to join. Quoting the lines in which Artaud attacks the very concept of the theater on which he has waged his entire undertaking ("Rien de plus impie que le système des Balinais . . ."), Jacques Derrida can rightly comment: 

[Artaud] was unable to resign himself to a theater based on repetition, unable to renounce a theater that would do away with all forms of repetition." 21 The same fatal interplay governs the writer’s attitude toward modernity: he cannot renounce the claim to being modern but also cannot resign himself to his dependence on predecessors—who, for that matter, were caught in the same situation. Never is Baudelaire so close to his predecessor Rousseau as in the extreme modernity of his latest prose poems, and never is Rousseau so tied to his literary ancestors as when he pretends to have nothing more to do with literature.

The distinctive character of literature thus becomes manifest as an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable. It seems that there can be no end, no respite in the ceaseless pressure of this contradiction, at least as long as we consider it from the point of view of the writer as subject. The discovery of his inability to be modern leads him back to the fold,
within the autonomous domain of literature, but never with genuine appeasement. As soon as he can feel appeased in this situation he ceases to be a writer. His language may be capable of a certain degree of tranquillity; it is, after all, the product of a renunciation that has allowed for the metaphorical thematization of the predicament. But this renunciation does not involve the subject. The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence.

The manner in which this inherent conflict determines the structure of literary language cannot be treated within the limits of this paper. We are more concerned, at this point, with the question of whether a history of an entity as self-contradictory as literature is conceivable. In the present state of literary studies this possibility is far from being clearly established. It is generally admitted that a positivistic history of literature, treating it as if it were a collection of empirical data, can only be a history of what literature is not. At best, it would be a preliminary classification opening the way for actual literary study and, at worst, an obstacle in the way of literary understanding. On the other hand, the intrinsic interpretation of literature claims to be anti- or a-historical, but often presupposes a notion of history of which the critic is not himself aware.

In describing literature, from the standpoint of the concept of modernity, as the steady fluctuation of an entity away from and toward its own mode of being, we have constantly stressed that this movement does not take place as an actual sequence in time; to represent it as such is merely a metaphor making a sequence out of what occurs in fact as a synchronic juxtaposition. The sequential, diachronic structure of the process stems from the nature of literary language as an entity, not as an event. Things do not happen as if a literary text (or a literary vocation) moved for a certain period of time away from its center, then turned around, folding back upon itself at one specific moment to travel back to its genuine point of origin. These imaginary motions between fictional points cannot be located, dated, and represented as if they were places in a geography or events in a genetic history. Even in the discursive texts we have used—in Baudelaire, in Nietzsche, or even
in Fontenelle—the three moments of flight, return, and the turning point at which flight changes into return or vice-versa exist simultaneously on levels of meaning that are so intimately intertwined that they cannot be separated. When Baudelaire, for example, speaks of “représentation du présent,” of “mémoire du présent,” of “synthèse du fantôme,” or of “ébauche finie,” his language names, at the same time, the flight, the turning point, and the return. Our entire argument lies compressed in such formulations. This would even be more obvious if we had used poetic instead of discursive texts. It follows that it would be a mistake to think of literary history as the diachronic narrative of the fluctuating motion we have tried to describe. Such a narrative can be only metaphorical, and history is not fiction.

With respect to its own specificity (that is, as an existing entity susceptible to historical description), literature exists at the same time in the modes of error and truth; it both betrays and obeys its own mode of being. A positivistic history that sees literature only as what it is not (as an objective fact, an empirical psyche, or a communication that transcends the literary text as text) is, therefore, necessarily inadequate. The same is true of approaches to literature that take for granted the specificity of literature—what the French structuralists, echoing the Russian formalists, call literaryité (littérarité) of literature. If literature rested at ease within its own self-definition, it could be studied according to methods that are scientific rather than historical. We are obliged to confine ourselves to history when this is no longer the case, when the entity steadily puts its own ontological status into question. The structuralist goal of a science of literary forms assumes this stability and treats literature as if the fluctuating movement of aborted self-definition were not a constitutive part of its language. Structuralist formalism, therefore, systematically bypasses the necessary component of literature for which the term “modernity” is not such a bad name after all, despite its ideological and polemical overtones. It is a very revealing paradox, confirming again that anything touching upon literature becomes at once a Pandora’s box, that the critical method which denies literary modernity would appear—and even, in certain respects, would be—the most modern of critical movements.

Could we conceive of a literary history that would not truncate literature by putting us misleadingly into or outside it, that would be able to maintain the literary aporia throughout, account at the
same time for the truth and the falsehood of the knowledge literature conveys about itself, distinguish rigorously between metaphorical and historical language, and account for literary modernity as well as for its historicity? Clearly, such a conception would imply a revision of the notion of history and, beyond that, of the notion of time on which our idea of history is based. It would imply, for instance, abandoning the pre-assumed concept of history as a generative process that we found operative in Nietzsche's text—although this text also began to rebel against it—of history as a temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure in which the past is like an ancestor begetting, in a moment of unmediated presence, a future capable of repeating in its turn the same generative process. The relationship between truth and error that prevails in literature cannot be represented genetically, since truth and error exist simultaneously, thus preventing the favoring of the one over the other. The need to revise the foundations of literary history may seem like a desperately vast undertaking; the task appears even more disquieting if we contend that literary history could in fact be paradigmatic for history in general, since man himself, like literature, can be defined as an entity capable of putting his own mode of being into question. The task may well be less sizable, however, than it seems at first. All the directives we have formulated as guidelines for a literary history are more or less taken for granted when we are engaged in the much more humble task of reading and understanding a literary text. To become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation—provided only it is good interpretation—is in fact literary history. If we extend this notion beyond literature, it merely confirms that the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or evolutions.

References

2. Ibid., p. 211.
3. Ibid., p. 215.
DAEDALUS

4. Ibid., p. 216.


8. Ibid., p. 261.

9. Ibid., p. 277.


11. Critical utterances concerning the Homeric question are particularly revealing in this respect, in a partisan of the Moderns like Charles Perrault as well as in a partisan of the Ancients like Boileau.

12. H. R. Jauss, *op. cit.*, mentions as other convincing instances of critical insight among the defenders of the Ancients la Bruyère’s *Discours sur Théophraste* (1699) and Saint-Evremont’s *Sur les poèmes des anciens* (1685).


16. Ibid., pp. 224-225. The italics are ours.

17. Ibid., p. 228.

18. Ibid., p. 219.

19. Ibid., p. 259.

20. Ibid.