

## V

POETRY AS SYNTHESIS  
OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

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Literature Contains All Art

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TV: 95

Clay-modeling, a dream that brings us back to our childhood! It has often been said that the child contains all possibilities. As children, we were painters, modelers, botanists, sculptors, architects, hunters, explorers. What has become of all that?

At the very heart of maturity, however, there is a means of regaining these lost possibilities. A means? What! I might be a great painter?—Yes, you might be a great painter a few hours a day.—I might create masterworks?—Yes, you might create wonderful masterpieces, works that would give you the direct joys of wonderment, which would take you back to the happy time when the world was a source of wonder.

That means is literature. One has but to *write* the painted work. One has but to write the statue. Pen in hand—if only we are willing to be sincere—we regain all the powers of youth, we reexperience these powers as they used to be, in their naive assurance, with their rapid, linear, sure joys. Through the channel of *literary imagination*, all the arts are ours. A beautiful adjective, well placed, in the right light, sounding in the proper harmony of vowels, is all we need for a substance. A stylistic trait is enough for a personality, for a man. Speaking, writing! Telling, narrating! Inventing the past! Remembering, pen in hand, with the acknowledged and evident

intention to *write well*, to *compose*, to *make beautiful*, in order to be quite sure that we go beyond the autobiography of a real past event and that we rediscover the autobiography of lost possibilities, the very dreams, the true, real dreams, which we lived with slow, lingering pleasure. The specific aesthetics of literature is to be found there. Literature functions as a substitute. It restores life to lost possibilities.

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Reading as a Dimension of Consciousness

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PR: 22–23, 131–32

Reading is a dimension of modern consciousness, a dimension that transposes psychic phenomena already transposed by writing.<sup>[1]</sup> Written language must be considered as a particular psychic reality. A book is permanent: it is a kind of object present before our eyes. It speaks to us with a repetitive authority that we would not experience in the presence of the author himself. We must read what is written. Moreover, in writing, the author has already made a transposition. He would not say what he writes. Whether he admits it or not, he has entered the domain of the written psyche . . .

The best proof of a book's specific existence is that it is at once a reality of the virtual and a virtuality of the real. When we read a novel, we are placed in another life that makes us suffer, hope, sympathize, but we retain the complex impression, nevertheless, that our anguish remains under the control of our free will, that our anguish is not radical. An agonizing book can therefore offer a technique for reducing anguish. It provides anguished people with a homeopathy of anguish. But this homeopathy is most effective in a meditative reading, when a literary interest endows the text with values. Then two levels of the psyche are split apart, the reader participates in these two levels, and when he is completely conscious of the *aesthetics of anguish*, he is on the point of discovering its factitiousness. For anguish is artificial: we were meant to breathe freely.

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1. [See passage concerning poetry and sublimation in Chapter III.]

That is why poetry—the highest of aesthetic joys—is beneficial . . .

And so, early in the morning, seeing the books piled on my table, I say my voracious reader's prayer to the god of reading: "Give us this day our daily hunger" . . .

In its products and in its producer, reverie can very well acquire the etymological meaning of the word poetic. Reverie gathers being around its dreamer. It gives him the illusion of being more than he is. Thus, over the lessened being of the relaxed state in which reverie is formed, a structure takes shape in a relief that the poet will swell into an augmented being. The philosophical study of reverie evokes shadings of ontology.

This ontology is easily grasped, since it is an ontology of well-being—a well-being commensurate with the being of the one capable of dreaming it. There is no well-being without reverie, no reverie without well-being. We discover by reverie, in the first place, that being is good. A philosopher would say: being is a value.

Must we reject this summary characterization of reverie as happiness under pretext that happiness is a psychologically shallow, meager, childish state—and also that the mere word *happiness* stifles all analysis and drowns psychic life in banality? Poets offer us the shadings of a cosmic happiness that are so numerous and varied that we must say that the world of reverie begins with shading. That is how the daydreamer gains an impression of originality. Through shadings, we grasp the dreamer's experience of the nascent *cogito*.

The *cogito* of thought can wander, wait, choose—the *cogito* of reverie is immediately attached to its object, to its image. The shortest distance of all is the one between the imagining subject and the imagined image. Reverie lives on its initial interest. The subject is astonished to encounter the image in his reverie; indeed, he is amazed, charmed, awakened. Great dreamers are masters of sparkling consciousness. A kind of multiple *cogito* takes on new life in the closed world of a poem. Of course, other powers of consciousness are required to take possession of the poem's totality. But the flash of an image already provides us with an illumination. How often discontinuous reveries give life to the dreaming state! Are not two types of reverie possible, as we either let ourselves flow with

the happy sequence of images, or live at the center of an image and feel it radiate forth? A *cogito* is firmly established in the soul of the dreamer living at the center of a radiating image.

Suddenly an image occupies the heart of our imagining being. It seizes us, holds us. It infuses us with being. The *cogito* is won over by an object from the world, which by itself represents the world. The imagined detail is a sharp point that penetrates the reverie and prompts the dreamer to a more concrete meditation. His being is simultaneously the being of the image and his commitment to the astonishing image. The image brings us an illustration of our wonderment. The registers of sensation correspond with and complete one another. In reverie on a simple object we experience a polyvalence of our dreaming being.

A flower, a fruit, a simple familiar object suddenly insists that we think of it, that we dream in its company, that we help it to rise to the level of man's companion. Without poets we could never find the direct objects of our dreamer's *cogito*. Not all worldly objects are available for poetic reveries. But once a poet has chosen his object, the object itself changes being. It is promoted to the poetical.

What a joy it is, then, to take the poet at his word, to dream with him, to believe what he says, to live in the world that he offers us by placing the world under the sign of an object, of a fruit or a flower from the world.

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#### Artificial Paradises

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PR: 145-47

A broader investigation than the present one of the aesthetics of oneirism should consider the study of *paradis artificiels* as they are described by writers and poets. We would have to explore numerous phenomenological lines in order to discover the "I" of the many different states corresponding to different narcotics! They would at least have to be divided into three classes: the "I" of sleep if it exists; the "I" of narcosis if it retains an individual value; and the "I" of reverie, which remains in such a state of vigilance that it can afford the joy of writing.

Who will ever determine the ontological weight of all the imagined "I's"? A poet writes:

Is it ours, this dream in us,  
I make my way alone and multiplied  
am I myself, am I another  
are we but imagined beings.<sup>[2]</sup>

Is there an "I" that subsumes these multiple "I's"? An "I" of all others that has mastery over our entire being, over all our inner beings? Novalis writes: "The supreme task of education is to take possession of one's transcendental self, to be at once the 'I' of one's 'I.'"<sup>[3]</sup>

But what am I seeking in these "artificial paradises"—I, a mere armchair psychologist? Dreams or reveries? Which are the decisive documents for me? Books, nothing but books. Would "artificial paradises" be paradises if they were not written? For us readers, they are readers' paradises.

They were written in order to be read, with the assurance that their poetic value would be the means of communication between the author and the reader. It was in order to write that so many poets experimented with the reveries of opium. But who can tell the respective roles of experience and of art? Edmond Jaloux makes a shrewd remark about Edgar Allan Poe: Poe's opium is an *imagined opium*. Imagined before, reimagined afterward, never described during the experience. Who can tell us the difference between experienced opium and transfigured opium? As for us readers who want not to know but to dream, we must follow the ascent from the experience to the poem. According to Jaloux, "the power of man's imagination is greater than any poison."<sup>[4]</sup> He also says, speaking of Poe: "He ascribes to the poppy one of the most striking characteristics of his own spirituality."<sup>[5]</sup>

2. Géo Libbrecht, *Enchanteur de toi-même: Suivi de légende satanique* (Paris: Seghers, Collection Poèmes choisis, 1952), 43.

3. "Die höchste Aufgabe der Bildung ist, sich eines transzendentalen Selbst zu bemächtigen, das Ich seines Ichs zugleich zu sein." Novalis, "Blütenstaub," in *Schriften*, vol. II [Jena: E. Diederichs, 1907], 117.

4. Edmond Jaloux, *Edgar Poe et les femmes* (Geneva: Éditions du Milieu du Monde, 1943), 125.

5. *Ibid.*, 129.

But here again, cannot the one who experiences psychotropic images find in them the same stimulation as in psychotropic substances? The beauty of images increases their effectiveness. The multiplicity of images assumes the function of uniformity of cause. A poet does not hesitate to devote himself entirely to the effectiveness of images. Henri Michaux writes: "No need for opium. Everything is a drug to one who chooses to live on the other side."<sup>[6]</sup>

And what is a beautiful poem if not folly recast? A little poetic order imposed upon aberrant images? It is maintaining intelligent sobriety in the use—however intensive—of imaginary drugs. Reveries, wild reveries, lead our lives.

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The Vertical Axis of Reverie

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FC: 56-59

Among the reveries that give us buoyancy, reveries of elevation are the most effective and direct. All upright objects point to a zenith. An upright form rises and carries us off in its verticality.<sup>[7]</sup> The conquest of a real mountain peak is a sporting feat; the dream goes even higher, it takes us to a zone beyond verticality. Many a dream of flight is born in the emulation of verticality aroused by upright and vertical beings. Near towers and trees a dreamer of heights dreams of the sky. Dreams of height give sustenance to our instinct of verticality, an instinct that is repressed by the needs of everyday, prosaically horizontal life. Vertically—tending reverie is the most liberating of all. There is no surer way of dreaming well than dreaming in another world. But is not the world *above* the most decisive of *other* worlds? May dreams develop in which the above forgets and suppresses the below? Living at the zenith of the upright object,

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6. Henri Michaux, *Plume* [Paris: Gallimard, 1957], 68.

7. [When Bachelard was working on the elements, particularly in TV, he associated verticality with solid materials (the tree, the granite pillar, etc.) capable of supporting their movement upward. Here, the axes of reverie are more detached from matter and designate instead the dimensions of space and interior life.]

gathering reveries of verticality, we experience a transcendence of being. The image of verticality brings us into the realm of values. In communing through imagination with the verticality of an upright object we experience the beneficial influence of lifting forces, we participate in the hidden fire dwelling in beautiful forms, forms assured of their verticality. . .

The simpler their object, the greater the reveries. The flame of the candle on the solitary man's table prefigures all the reveries of verticality. The flame is a valiant and fragile vertical. A breath disturbs it, but it rises up anew. A lifting force restores its magic. "The candle burns high and its purple rears up," says a line by Georg Trakl.<sup>[8]</sup>

The flame is an inhabited verticality. Any dreamer of flame knows that the flame is alive. . . And what a full, what a beautiful moment when the candle burns well! What delicate life in the flame that stretches and tapers out! The values of life and dream then reach their full association.

"A stem of fire! Can we ever know all that gives fragrance?" asks another poet.<sup>[9]</sup> Yes, the stem of a flame is so upright, so frail, that the flame becomes a flower.

Thus images and things exchange their powers. The entire room of the dreamer of flame possesses an atmosphere of verticality. A gentle but firm dynamic force draws dreams toward the heights. One may well be interested in the inner swirls surrounding the wick, and see in the depth of the flame stirrings where shadow and light struggle. But every dreamer of flame lifts his dream toward the summit. It is there that fire becomes light. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam took as the epigraph for a chapter of his *Isis* this Arab proverb: "The torch does not illuminate its base."

The greatest dreams are in the heights.

The flame is so fundamentally vertical that, for a dreamer of being, it appears stretched toward the beyond, toward an ethereal non-being. In a poem entitled "Flame" we read:

8. *Anthologie de la poésie allemande des origines à nos jours*, vol. II, [ed. and trans. René Lasne and Georges Rabuse (Paris: Stock, 1942)], 109.

9. Edmond Jabès, *Les Mots tracent* [Paris: Librairie "Les Pas perdus," 1951], 15.

Bridge of fire thrown between real and unreal constant  
coexistence of being and non-being . . .<sup>[10]</sup>

To play with being and nonbeing, starting from a trifle, from a flame—perhaps merely an imagined flame—is for a philosopher a beautiful instance of illustrated metaphysics.

10. Roger Asselineau, *Poésies incomplètes* (Paris: Debresse, 1959), 38.