The Monstrous Novel

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There exist a handful of huge novels from the first part of this century which are commonly qualified as unreadable: Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, just to mention some of the most important, and still a couple of others. Most professional readers are immediately able to isolate this group of novels: *the monstrous*. It is not hard to point out a series of common formal traits in these works, traits that are present, to be sure, in different combinations and intensities, but still recognozable as a common substance: the tremendous size, the shattered epic structure, the opaque relationship between inner and outer reality, the excessive indulgence in reflection, the destruction of our normal ideas of time, space, and causality, the pointed consciousness of metatextuality, the numerous references to the widest possible horizon of culture, and so on. The innovations of the form and language of the novel surfacing in these works are so ambitious and so ample that one might reasonably claim that we still do not, even today, feel quite up-to-date with them, neither with the ways of thinking they imply, nor with the aesthetic and formal choices through which they constitute themselves. There seem to remain moments in these novels that elude cognition, although we witness a continuous flow of studies taking up the challenge from these aging monsters in still more refined and complicated interpretive frameworks and thus recognizing them precisely as a challenge: to our imagination, to our ways of thinking, to our aesthetic sensibility.

The first and obvious move in order to focus on the phenomenon of "the monstrous" is of course to establish a kind of repertoire of its common formal particularities; but before doing so we should also recognize that this task taken by itself--however monstrous it might be--remains in some respects inadequate as a means of description. In the course of time, it seems as if the majority of these formal particularities have sedimented themselves in the contemporary literary consciousness, and they can be detected at different places and in a variety of forms in the arborescent tradition of experimental and aesthetically self-conscious literature in this century. The massive presence of formal innovations in the family of monsters already assures their position as a veritable nodal point in the development of modernist literature, and one might even assert that the formal development in the adjacent tradition amounts to nothing more than a series of footnotes, unfolding and reelaborating the material once set on the agenda by these works. But despite of this undeniably crucial position, they haven't had any immediately apparent succession. The modernist tradition

that springs from the monstrous novel may have many traits in common with it, just as the different authors might identify themselves with the inheritance with different degrees of fervour, but--it are not monstrous. It is not the aesthetic and reflexive punch in the monstrous expressive totality--this extremely complicated totality so desperately difficult to grasp--that has become more or less commonplace through the development of the modernist novel: only a number of particular techniques, motives, and ways of thinking. It appears to me, then, that there remains a kind of *surplus* in these novels, a monstrous aesthetic project, you might say, that cannot be immediately summed up in a repertoire of formal peculiarities.

In order to circumscribe this peculiar aesthetic project, the French scholar Antoine Compagnon has--in a recent book, *Proust entre deux siècles*--advocated an interpretive strategy that leaves behind the exclusively formal-descriptive approach dear to the modernist aesthetics in order to establish a historical reflection on the conditions of emergence underlying the monstrous project, and thereby on the dynamic factors behind the formal revolution it has initiated. Compagnon's point in making this manoeuvre is not, however--according to the well established front lines of an old and interminable discussion--to substitute the quest for the internal logic of the individual works with a notion of historical truth supposed to determine the particular content of the works. When he opposes the purely immanent approach and advocates a historical analysis, it is not in the straightforward intention to historicize certain formal achievements as though we were already sufficiently familiar with their status and appearance. The historical approach is not simply aimed at explaining the form, but is called in as a vehicle to reach a more profound understanding of the singular momentum of Proust's literary universe in the formal development of the modern novel. The historical approach is conceived as accessory to the question of form, and not the other way round. And this approach, as Compagnon develops it through his observations on Proust, will prove, I think, to be valid for the entire group of monstrous novels.

To Compagnon, the seminal logic of genesis in Proust's novel is the way in which he "asks one question and answers another question".[1] Proust's initial question, as it is elaborated in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, stems from a nineteenth-century discussion, but when he moves to write his novel in order to substantialize his theses, the question itself is transfigured in the very process of writing. Proust's aesthetic views on the question of the unity of the work of art, with which he intervenes in the contemporary discussion between classicists and *décadents*, are not simply demonstrated, i.e. worked out and elaborated in his novel; if this was the case, he would, by the publication of the first part of the novel in 1913, have provided nothing but an answer to a

question nobody was able to take seriously any more. Instead, he came out with a novel that not only reconciled the ancient conflict between the conservative, formal austerity on the one hand and the spirit of fragmentation inferred to the decadents on the other, but did far more than that. In the laborious process of writing, Proust invented an absolutely new notion of formal unity and totality that no longer owed anything to the discussion from which he started out, that is, nothing but the impulse to start out itself.

To seize the scope of Proust's novel, we must, according to Compagnon, consider it as grounded, not in a homogenous soil, but--however paradoxically--in a rupture, in a transition between two worlds, two ways of thinking, belonging to either one of them, but determined by the very rupture in his unmistakeably individual effort to bridge the ever expanding gap between the mental and material continents of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Before the traditional question, whether Proust is the last novelist of the nineteenth century or the first one of the twentieth, Compagnon chooses--not to choose; not because he declines the pertinence of the question, but because the question cannot be answered by a univocal either-or. There is no doubt, however, that Proust's novel belongs to the twentieth century and that his descendants are still working in the shade of his figure and in the light of his achievements. But then, still, his descendants are not simply following a path pointed out by him. "For most of us today," Nathalie Sarraute wrote in 1956, "the works of Joyce and Proust are distant monuments, witnesses of an overthrown era."[2] Thus, the seminal importance of these works to the twentieth century appears in turn to be inseparable from the specific and hopelessly outdated horizon of the late nineteenth century. In this perspective, their modernity seems to stem precisely from their lasting, conflictual staggering about with a bundle of ancient, inherited categories and discussions, from their being tied up in the no-man's-land "entre deux siècles".

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There is something in these canonized modernist novels that prevents them from being unambiguously modern, a surplus in their aesthetic expression (*Ausdruck*, says Adorno) that can not easily be adapted into that line of aesthetic rationalization leading from, say, Flaubert to Beckett. The French-German scholar Pierre Zima has attempted to embrace a common feature in some of these novels with the term of "ambivalence".[3] One might in fact find ambivalent structures in multiple forms: in the line of the plot, where the quasi-logical line of action breaks off in a perennial doubt regarding "the next step"; in the order of description, where the narrative is no longer able to pan continuously over a series of objects, but tends to stop dead at some insignificant detail and hereby leads the discourse off the path of narrative; in the very

psychology of the heroes, who are all notoriously incapable of making any decisions; in the macro-structure of the works, where there often seems to be several parallel although--very often--mutually excluding ways of reading, and so on.

The concept of an ambivalent discourse in these novels makes us aware of a constitutive inner tension in the narrative, a series of unresolved antagonisms, which might in turn be considered as some of the basis for their refusal to be classified. The combination of a meticulous inner construction, an opaque and multi-relational textual tissue, and a thoroughgoing will, not to resolve contradictions, but to fix them in enigmatic, paradoxical and ambivalent figures--this double effort seems to *seal* these works, as if to send them on to posterity as immobilized imprints of a unique historical moment with all its unresolved contradictions in regard to political-historical issues, aesthetic strategies and individual experiences. The monstrous texts cannot be disentangled in an aesthetic sphere alone; when we keep reading and interpreting them and keep quarreling on their signification, it seems due to the fact they have built in a conglomerate of virtual and actual tensions, discontinuities, and paradoxes from their immediate surroundings and handed them over to the future readers as petrified diagrams of an insecure and aborted experience, and we meet them as we meet those real monsters in formaldehyde that are glancing enigmatically at us from the shelves in the medical museums.

In a number of diary-entries from the mid-twenties, Robert Musil meditates on the unique situation of his generation--those born around 1880. They have grown up within the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century; their personalities, world-views, and conceptions of reality belong to a "world of yesterday", as Stefan Zweig put it, while on the other hand they find themselves, as they reach their mature age, not only in an other period, but in a completely different world. If we follow Arnold Hauser, the twentieth century began by 1914 and was already old by 1918; thus, when Musil and his generation look back on their youth, they contemplate an unfamiliar, dusty world of remembrances, that should rather have belonged to their grandparents than to themselves. This experience of discontinuity leaves the impression of an extreme condensation of time in a relatively limited span of years; not only the monumentality of the war, but also those immense political, social, and economical changes it initiated result in a feeling that half a century has passed during those four years.

Due to this idea of a sudden historical acceleration, we bedome aware a kind of double chronology in the intellectual biographies of this generation; on the one hand, we have the image of a "normal" intellectual evolution expressed in the revolutionary pathos known from the european *fin-de-siècle*, the intention to overthrow the sham

and mendacious bourgeois culture and start afresh under the aegis of a scientific culture, a nietzschean super-man, a rationalized language, or whatever. On the other hand, there is the real transformation into the now familiar industrialized civilization of the twentieth century that in turn overthrows the revolutionary sons. "So much hope there was," Musil notes. "And then the homogenous movement (*Der geschlossene Zug*) lost its cohesion and all at once everyone stood alone face to face with the unsolved problems." [4]

This image of two superimposed chronologies might add another historico-philosophical aspect to the idea of a gap between two centuries as the peculiar soil of the monstrous novels. Following Musil's reflection, we get the impression of a generation striving to break its own way out of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth with a new enthusiasm born out of the extremely fertile movement of ideas in the european *fin-de-siècle*. In retrospect, however, this enthusiastic vision of the new century as a blank page where the revolutionaries could inscribe the images of a new society, a new human being, and a new order of knowledge, shows up to be nothing but a virtual future, a mere possibility that was not realized and therefore left behind in the ditch by the road of history. This experience gives us a hint about the background for the extremely feeble sense of reality in the monstrous novels, very explicit in Musil, where "something real means no more than something imagined", [5] but also in the other novels, to whom it is of minor concern to represent reality according to our normal expectations, and where the crucial events stand in an oblique position to what we normally consider as "real".

Following this line of reflection, we become aware of another historical issue underneath the stunning singularity and irreproducability of the monstrous novel: not only that it is founded in the transition between two centuries, but also that this interstitial position has provoked a unique gesture reaching out towards the mirage of a new century that never passed into actual existence. There is tinge of utopianism in the versatile and vaguely floating representation of reality in these works. This is not, however, the kind of utopianism known as *adunaton* that naively depicts the impossible, but rather an utopianism that invests the literary discourse in those past visions, insights, and anticipations that were never realized in the course of history. The immense re-writing of the past in Proust is carried by this implicit ethos insofar as the re-writing is not in the first place, as Benjamin has pointed out, a strategy of remembering, but a vehicle of *forgetting* and of imaginary refiguration;[6] in Musil, the task of the "sense of the possible" is explicitly defined as "realisation (not only) of say, the future, but also the past and its lost opportunities" (p. 326); Stephen Daedalus' famous remark in *Ulysses*, finally, that "history is a nightmare from which I am trying

to awake", might also be interpreted along the same line--that is, that history is no longer considered as the inevitable execution of what is undoubtably necessary, but rather as a malformation of what was there to start with.

The utopian motive in these novels is thus obviously not simply a preoccupation with an altogether different, enchanted reality. Rather, it implies an altogether different interpretation of what is actually there, another perception of reality. One might baptize this position a pragmatic utopianism, or, with a formula taken from Leo Bersani: an aesthetic redemption of lived experience, where "art simultaneously erases, repeats and redeems life".[7] This formula might in fact, I think, allowing myself to use it somehow out line with Bersani's argument, serve to disentangle the rather complicated and unstable metabolism between the realist and the utopian sides of these fictions. The source of the pathos of redemption in the monstrous novels seems, as we have seen, to spring from their very peculiar historical situation. Not only are they embedded in a specific context, to which they respond; furthermore, their aesthetics are intimately linked and obliged to something that does not exist. Their representation tends to *erase* the order of reality as a scheme of thinking and acting in their contemporary world. But at the same time, they *repeat* life in the aesthetic medium--which is governed by other laws that the present reality--and thus tend to reevaluate the experience of everyday life in the context of their imaginary versions of what the twentieth century might have become. Thereby, the *redemptive* strategy might be specified as an aesthetic transfiguration of an actual, everyday experience-- the basic experiences of perceiving, thinking, and remembering--as a virtual raw material for other conceptions of reality and other states of reality that were left over in the actual process of modernization. In this respect, there seems to be a specific logic determining the interrelation between realist and utopian strata of the fiction, where the utopian order expresses itself in the aesthetically mediated grasp of realist elements, and where the singular details of immediate experience seem in turn to contain tacit cues towards the possibility of thinking reality in a different manner. When interpreted in these terms, the aesthetics of redemption does not allude to any metaphysics of epiphany, where the aesthetic vocation is to excavate a sacred order underneath the material world; it seems much closer to Benjamin's idea of "bursting the continuum of history".[8] In Benjamin's view, as you know, every present contains some hidden dimension which allows the meticulous spectator or participant to break the present moment out of its immediate context an reinsert it in another context in a process of reciprocal interpretation, where the isolated present actualizes an ignored potential in the distant context and where this one in turn reveals a virtual framework to reinterpret the present.

I would not, however, simply propose Benjamin's idea as a key to the interpretation of the different strategies of aesthetic redemption in the monstrous novels; I will rather note the strikingly *parallel* intentions to reinterpret the course of history in secularized utopian terms in Benjamin and in the novels in question. Which might again, to a second consideration, not be very surprising at all when it is taken into account that Benjamin himself belongs to the generation caught in passage between two centuries, as the images of remembrance in "Childhood in Berlin" clearly witness. Benjamin's very explicit wordings of an active, constructivist reinterpretation of history do however, on the other hand, contribute to profile the account of the redemptive aesthetics and to articulate the historical uniqueness of the monstrous novel. And after all, Benjamin must be admitted to be a rather suitable theoretical companion for the monstrous narrative aesthetics, being himself the author of the uncontestably most monstrous theoretical work of this century.

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As I suggested at the beginning, it is extremely tempting to characterize the monstrosity *ex negativo*, as a de-formation of the forms handed over from the predecessors. The monstrous novel *no longer* has a linear and uni-lateral development of the plot as the fundamental pillar of the discourse; it *no longer* represents outer reality in an immediately recognizable way as the natural milieu for human actions; it *no longer* observes the rules of rational finality in human actions, it *no longer* conforms to the cartesian partition of the world in inner and outer reality (*res cogitans, res extensa*). The thesis underlying this spontaneous repertoire of *no longer*-identifications implies, I believe, the fundamentally true observation that the position of the monstrous novel vis-à-vis the traditional forms of the nineteenth century novel is not only one of mutual exclusion, but also one of conscious negativity. The canon of these works seems in this respect to be, varying one of Adorno's observations concerning Beckett, "all that is no longer possible", a canon of negation.

On the other hand, this negative link highlights another important function of the logics of *no longer*: that underneath the systematic rupture with all granted rules of representation there is an equally fundamental continuity, and that the monstrous novel is immensely indebted and attached to the universe of the nineteenth century novel precisely by way of the proto-hegelian procedure of negation. The thesis of discontinuity is thus inseparable from a parallel thesis of continuity.[9]

This double perspective of discontinuity and continuity, of break and continuation, might in turn contribute to shed some more light over my initial notion of the monstrous novel being intimately linked to the the phenomena of an interstice and a

transformation between two centuries, where the interstitial situation designates the liminal position on the threshold of a virtual new world after the death-sentence of the old one has been signed by a new spirit, and where the experience of transformation is on the other hand due to the chasm between having lived in the nineteenth century bourgeois culture and the twentieth century rational culture.

In the perspective of transformation between two very different outlines of the immediately perceptible world, first, I think that the double gesture can be defined generally as a will to maintain the ambition of the nineteenth century novel under a new set of circumstances. Restricting myself to a very generalizing perspective and leaving aside all the necessary interpretive proof, I think that this ambition could be characterized as the will to establish a literary representation of a pattern of possible experience. Experience, in this context, should be understood in its strongest and most emphatic sense: as *Erfahrung*, as the ways in which the individual subject perceives what is happening to it and transforms this immediate experience into a reflective framework, which in turn allows it to cumulate past experience in a homogenous manner and to transform these insights into adequate patterns of action. This vision of *Erfahrung* as an attempt to establish an effective and dynamic interrelation between the subject and its social context has found--as Franco Moretti has pointed out--its supreme expression in the early nineteenth century*Bildungsroman*. [10]

At stake in this type of novel is precisely the possibility for the individual subject to constitute itself as an effective subject of experience and in the same movement to constitute the surrounding world as a meaningful context for human action. Considered as a symbolic form--to take up another observation made by Franco Moretti--the traditional *Bildungsroman* expresses a piece of cultural strategy in its attempt to establish a fictional model of cohabitation between the subjective aspiration towards a meaningful and cumulative expansion of experience and the coercive conditions of its social surroundings.[11]

To a certain extent, this ambition is sedimented in the formal universe of the nineteenth century novel--in the outline of the plot as a unitary and immanent development, in the representation of reality as a solid frame of human actions, in the psychology of the protagonists constantly oscillating between the desired ideal and the pragmatic constraints, and so on. And this ambition is still at work in the universe of the monstrous novel; here, the fiction still takes place at the intersection between an individual project an a series of social constraints (taken in the broadest sense, ranging from the salary of kitchen-maids to the irrefutability of the critique of pure reason), just as it still stems from the desire of becoming in a world that is hostile or majestically indifferent to the particular individual aspiration. And it is precisely this

continuity, this solidarity with the project of the nineteenth century novel, that makes its early twentieth century descendant so radically different. The project remains, but the coordinates for unfolding it have changed dramatically; the character of compelling outer forces have changed, and so have the articulation of the individual projects. And they have changed to such an extent that we are no longer sure what is actually at stake in the confrontation; you might even say that the subjective and objective positions have been polarized to an extreme degree where the outline of their confrontation is no longer to be deduced by their immediate directions.

There is of course a solid majority of novels that do not face this problem with the same degree of acuity, choosing either to remain within the inherited paradigm of representation or to leave the ambition of the predecessors behind. It seems to me, however, that precisely the monstrous novels remain attached to this problem, not only as an ideological concern, but as a major formal concern, and that they introduce a series of formal lines along which, if not a solution, then a pointed articulation of the problem becomes possible.

The conditions for elaborating this question seems in turn to be related to the other aspect of the "entre-deux" I mentioned before, that the monstrosity of the early twentieth century novel is not only a result of its attachment to two fundamentally different orders of the world, but that it furthermore emerges from an interstice, from a point where the old order seems burnt out and a new, virtual order in the becoming.

Generally speaking, I do not think that it would have been possible for these novelists to set out in their immense attempt to maintain the traditional project of the novel under new circumstances without having access to a series of experimental and highly abstract models, according to which they could conceive of the juxtaposition of inner and outer reality in a number of new and disconcerting ways. The insisting perspectivalism, the fetichizing of details, the close examinations of queer states of conscience, and so on, occurring in these novels, seem to me not only to be kinds of illogical procedures making us loose the thread of narrative, but furthermore to be what Jean-François Lyotard once baptized *para-logical* devices. The use of paralogy in the narrative is closely related to the utopian horizon, I mentioned before, as experimental ways of perceiving and representing reality, that is, layers and aspects of reality that are not accessible to our traditional conceptions of the real. Such paralogies can be described in a negative way as consequences of the suspension of the epistemological assumptions underlying the traditional order of narrative. But they can also be described positively as an experimental confection of a range of representations of material events, temporal sequences, psychological reactions, and so on, all aimed at establishing new ways to imagine the relationship between the given life-world and

establishing new ways to imagine the relationship between the given the world and the individual project of a socially valid apprenticeship, and thus as aesthetic auxiliary functions designed to adapt the ambitions of the inherited novel form to a world that forcefully renounces these ambitions.

iv

In an attempt to concretize my observations concerning the monstrous novel as a liminal aesthetic form inscribed in the passage between two centuries, I would like to suggest a very superficial inventory of three major formal characteristics of this form: fragmentation, totalization, and reflexivity.

The notion of fragmentation is one of the most commonplace attributes to modernist art announcing, as Maurice Blanchot has pointed out, the irrevocable segregation between the realms of culture and of art: art has become increasingly uncivilized and "barbarian", he asserts--using Adorno's term from *The Philosophy of New Music*--and can no longer be reconciled with the humanist concept of culture dear to the nineteenth century as a sphere of accomplished and admirable monuments stored in humanity's "silo warehouses of culture".[12] This should not, however, be interpreted only as a wilful rejection of past ideals, but also as a paramount feature in an artistic practice rooted in a cultural context that does no longer permit the idea of a harmonious totality.

Following Adorno, to whom already Balzac's conception of a mimetic totality was born out of the experience that such a totality was missing, the fragmented work of art is simply the adequate representation of the state of the world, a necessarily shocking report of "comment c'est". Thus, according to the familiar stance of Critical Theory, the modernist work of art is not only a formalist construction, but--however alien it might seem according to our natural representation of the world--a simple mimesis to a contingent life world. This insight can still, I think, be applied to the formal universes of the singular works in an interpretation og the individual literary figures within a historical framework.

On the other hand, one should not emphasize the notion of fragmentation as an immediate form of mimesis to such an extent that it occults the attention towards the internal constructive logic underneath the apparently chaotic surface of the text. In this respect, it might be useful to insist on the double meaning of "fragmentation": it does not only signify what we might take for an a priory "deformity" of a contingent lifeworld, but also the active de-formation of narrative schemes and models, as it is practised by the individual authors. Fragmentation, in this respect, involves a literary strategy that goes beyond any record of contingency. From the fact that a formal

scheme of representation is never a simple and straightforward designation of facts, but a complex system of codes and ordering principles, we become aware of a twofold source of mimetic narrative: on the one hand the attempt to express a given field of experience in more or less "immediate" ways, on the other hand a continuous reelaboration of the narrative modes of representation handed down in the history of the novel. This duplicity has probably never attained a more obvious visibility than in the monstrous novels; due to their adherence to the principles of representation inherited from the nineteenth century novel, they expand the chasm between immediate and historically mediated principles of representation to its maximal tension. The formal anomalies do in this respect seem to stem from a consciously performed exhaustion of "what can be said" within the boundaries of a specific representational paradigm. All the instances of digression and reflection, of parallelism and repetition, of acceleration and deceleration of narrative --the list of deforming techniques could be prolonged considerably--are already implicitly highlighted by the fact that they deviate from a traditional narrative scheme, constantly present as a subtext to what happens and as an interpretive context, that precisely fails to account for the meaning of what is happening. By this means something like an oblique system of representation takes form, a representation that draws the outline of a phenomenon, not "as it is", but as a specific "something" that shows up in the de-formation of already established representational schemes. Generally speaking, you cannot say nothing whatsoever "as it is": there are too many things and not enough words, as Flaubert once complained. And in this perspective, de-formation is a strategy of bending and remodelling existing forms in order to make them con-form to the intended matter of an insecure experience.

Fragmentation--and this is my major point--should thus be regarded not only as a depiction of fragmentation (or as an insolite provocation directed against the aesthetic ideals of bourgeois culture), but also as an attempt to open up--or you might say to deconstruct--existing formal schemes so as to make them function and signify differently: to adapt them to the kind of reality with which these novels are trying to cope, and to adapt them to those unrealized, "buried" possibilities in present reality, they are trying to grasp and elaborate in the fiction.

This leads us naturally on to my second category, that of totality. The ideal of nineteenth century fiction--and indeed still today of all those, from journalists to scriptwriters and popular narrators, who indulge in plot-making--is the harmonious structure of narrative causality. "Lucky the man," Musil says, "who can say 'when', 'before' and 'after'! (...) as soon as he is capable of recounting the events in their chronological order he feels as well content as if the sun was shining straight on his

belly."[13] Undoubtedly the most powerful technique of representing the world as we would like to see it is precisely this integration--or refiguration, as Paul Ricoeur would put it--of events and existences in a logical and continuous narrative thread. The aristotelian nexus of narrative has the wonderful hermeneutic double-face that it can integrate the singular event on the one hand and establish a dynamic and expanding totality on the other; in narrative, the difficult problem of totality and singularity--that is, of maintaining an eye for the particular from a point of view that does not vexate totality, and to maintain the construction of the whole without defiguring the singular--seems to be resolved all by itself within the paradigm of narrative. Or, to be more precise, the evolution of a modern order of narrative in the eighteenth and nineteenth century can be considered as a long process of experimentation aimed at balancing this kind of homeostasis between totality and singularity in the form of novelistic narrative.

Although we might still today find this narrative confection of totality highly admirable and worthy of all kinds of attention, the monstrous novels seem to have passed an unanimous verdict on it: "everything has now become non-narrative, no longer following a 'thread', but spreading out as an infinitely interwoven surface," Musil says (*ibid*). This suspicion towards the traditionally granted order of narrative does also, however, lead right to the centre of one of the most fulgurant problems of these fictions: how should they establish a new totality, a different term of unity and finitude to prevent that fragmentation results in a completely disarticulated multiplicity? The traditional narrative structure as we find it in different degrees of decomposition in these works, do no longer suffice to assure this function; it expresses a certain sense of solidarity and serves to a series of constructive ends, but the fact that the fiction is focalized on Marcel's entire life, on a year in Ulrich's, or on a day in Leopold's, does no longer suffice to integrate the immense and fragmented universe in a unitarian form.

The problem of totality is not only a common preoccupation for the entire period, as Claudio Magris has brilliantly exposed in the first chapter of *Clarisse's Ring*[14]; it also implies a constant menace to the very possibility of fiction. Face to face with the impossibility to recur to the techniques of traditional narrative, the novelists start searching for other means to assure an immanent cohesion in the work: new matrixes of aesthetic totality, new devices of narrative integration. The representation can no longer depict everyday reality as an immediate totality; it has to invent alien schemes and patterns and project them onto the material in order to organize it: think of the homeric scheme in *Ulysses*, the architecture of the cathedral in Proust, the strict rules of symmetry with which Musil tried to bring a term to the perennial process of writ-

ing. None of these totalizing attempts, however, seem to be strongly rooted in an interpretive context; on the contrary, it is very likely that an interpretation that takes such clues as guidelines for an analysis will very soon get lost in an interminable labyrinth.[15] They are, I think, to be considered as mere auxiliary constructions, as a simple although necessary formal foil that should be approached with a certain amount of precauciousness. They serve as a means of articulation, but are not necessarily fundamental to what is articulated. Anyway, whether you interpret such totalizing features in a minimalist way, as I would tend to, or in a maximalist way--as Eliot, for instance, who saw *Ulysses* as an attempt to judge the lamentable contemporary reality by the standards of the homeric world--they reveal a discriminately new practice of writing in the overtly admitted transposition of alien patterns as a means to establish an effective aesthetic totality.[16]

A similar formal revolution takes place at the level of devices of integration, where the constitutive inner liaisons and junctions are no longer established according to the depiction of spatio-temporal logic of action, but are instead assured by a number of traditionally non-narrative manoeuvres such as repetition, parallelism, inversion, metaphoric constellation, transversal conjunction, symmetry, and structural resonance, just to mention some of them. To be sure, these devices are not revolutionarily new taken by themselves, and I would not argue that they surface here for the first time or that you cannot make a series of relevant points in analyzing the way in which they undergo a change in status and function through different historical contexts; what is interesting and what makes it relevant to highlight them in this connection is that they are assigned a new and crucial role in the confection of narrative. Instead of maintaining an accessory poetic logic in the sub text--that is, as a kind of "secondary" devices to saturate the text and overdetermine its signification--they are now placed in the foreground as the crucial functions that assure the very constitution and cohesion of the unfolding narrative. They take in the place formerly occupied by the techniques of narrative figuration located on the level of representable human actions and interaction. If they were formerly mere poetical supplements to the solid narrative thread, they are now adopted as indispensable means of handling the narrative development: it is no longer representations of spatio-temporal action that make the fiction go on, but fragile poetical devices, so that what once belonged to a order of, say, allusions and secondary hints of affinities is now assigned to establish the fundamental narrative continuity.

A curious thing about these new conceptions of totality and of narrative integration is that they can no longer perform the hermeneutical function of the ancient figuration of actions in the narrative plot. The substitution of the final unity of actions by an

alien and more or less fortuitous global matrix, and of the integration of spatio-temporal actions by a number of poetical and somehow comparably unsubstantial devices--this double substitution implies also a disruption of the hermeneutical symmetry between totality and event, since they do no longer spring from the same source.

This disruption brings about the last concept I would like to treat in the context of the problem of totality, namely what you might call the temptation of the infinite at stake in these novels. There are different ways to become aware of this movement towards the infinite. One of the most obvious is of cause the principle of more or less indefinite growth, which is in turn partly due to the lack of a hermeneutical principle able to close off the totality in a perfectly self-affirming unity, the sense of an ending arising from the accomplished chain of actions. There is nothing to prevent these universes from expanding by still one more step, whether it be according to the logic of induction dear to Musil, to the indefinitely expanded and increasingly sinuous path connecting beginning and end--in their turn fixed at a very early stage of the work--in Proust, or to the internal dimension of infinity in Joyce's text, where the mutilation of the discursive web allows a never-ending proliferation of possible horizons of interpretation.[17] In these different dimensions of infinity--and I don't mean to insist on mapping them as schematically as I have been doing here in order to suggest a brief survey--the monstrous novels are in fact interminable, not only to the authors (Musil and Proust actually left works-in-progress behind, Musil obviously, and Proust to the extend that he had not given up the idea of adding still more insertions and elaborations), but also to the posterior readers who will probably never reach a final agreement, not only on the questions of interpretation, but also on the innumerable questions of pure and simple signification.

This growth beyond any limits is in part attributable to the encyclopedic ambition to represent the totality of contemporary reality without having access to an order of representation able to grasp this totality in a synthetic way--in this respect, it has a remarkable affinity to the project Borges once imagined: to map the entire world in a 1:1-scale. But this growth in extension seems also to be doubled by a kind of inverse approach to the infinite by means of what the French scholar Anne Longuet-Marx has called a technique of "punctualization",[18] that is, a kind of monadological construction leaving behind the impression that you can start out an interpretation from almost any singular point in the fictional universe and that the infinite cosmos of the work can be retrieved in every detail. Instead of the hermeneutical relation between the narrative totality and the particular action, we now face a monadological relation between an infinite aesthetic cosmos and the particular details and events that are no longer simply lined up in the construction of the whole, but reflect it in a dissipative

play of mirrors that indeed belong to the anatomy of the monstrous totality.

My last general point in the repertoire of the formal peculiarities, finally, is the role of reflexivity. It is fairly easy to recognize a number of self-reflexive traits in these novels, ranging from the increasing importance attributed to meta-literary references at the cost of the immediate and "realist" contextualization of events, to the insistingly hermetic features of internal organization and textual macrame that tend to annul immediate referentiality and replace it by an immanent play of signification.

There is however something deconcerting about the predominant role that has been given to self-reflexivity as a major characteristic of modernist (and indeed post-modernist) art and literature. On the one hand, there is no doubt that self-reflexivity has become an increasingly conspicuous device in modern literature, but on the other hand it is hard to specify its unique modernity; after all, this kind of reflexivity is always and necessarily involved in any literary representation of a given reality, however mediated it is. Following this line of argument, you might say that reflexivity is getting an ever more acute component of fiction as the credibility of given historical and traditionalized means and codes of representation are decreasing. Thus, the foregrounding of reflexivity is not attributable to any specific event in the history of narrative fiction, but should rather be seen as an ironic double to the gesture of representation which is articulated in inverse proportion to the possibility of immediate representation.

Peter Bürger has made an observation that is rather relevant to this discussion, pointing out that there seems to occur a gradual shift in the notion of truth involved in the realm of fiction. Within the realist tradition the novel legitimizes representation by referring to an external instance of truth on which representation is precisely to be measured--"The work functions as a sign referring to the social reality that it interprets", Bürger says[19]--whereas the modern novel has displaced the instance of truth to the process of writing itself. Truth is no longer to be retrieved, but to be produced.

In this context, the various signs of self-reflexivity can be regarded, not only as an ironical mode, but also as a functional devise in the fiction. If considered as a deliberately chosen consequence of the necessarily increasing intransigency of literary language, reflexivity and meta-fiction tend to become invaluable means of bringing forward the ambition to symbolize possible models of experience, although they can no longer be substantialized as immediately conceivable in the social context that--in turn--motivates them. Self-reflexivity thus deliberately circumscribes an intransitive field of possible, aesthetic experience. Reflexivity becomes so to speak a precondition for the ambition to activate the aesthetic sphere of narrative as a means to invent pat-

terns of possible experience. Due to this reflexive self-delimitation, the aesthetic as well as the intellectual project of the nineteenth century novel can be maintained, no longer through the illusion of mimesis, but through an increasingly overt conflict with the contemporary reality which is not--and never were, by the way--what it promised to be. In this respect too, these are novels that, following the insight of a character in Beckett's *Endgame*, consequently treat the present life as a future one.