This book deals with the same topic in fourteen scenes. This topic is announced by its very title: Aisthesis. For two centuries in the West, 'aesthetics' has been the name for the category designating the sensible fabric and intelligible form of what we call 'Art'. In my other works, I have already had the opportunity to argue that, even if histories of art begin their narratives with cave paintings at the dawn of time, Art as a notion designating a form of specific experience has only existed in the West since the end of the eighteenth century. All kinds of arts and practices existed before then, to be sure, among which a small number benefited from a privileged status, due not to their intrinsic excellence but to their place in the division of social conditions. Fine arts were the progeny of the so-called liberal arts. The latter were distinguished from the mechanical arts because they were the pastime of free men, men of leisure whose very quality was meant to deter them from seeking too much perfection in material performances that an artisan or a slave could accomplish. Art as such began to exist in the West when this hierarchy of forms of life began to vacillate. The conditions of this emergence cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being. Such concepts themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected. They formulate a mode of intelligibility out of these reconfigurations of experience.
The term *Aisthesis* has designated the mode of experience according to which, for two centuries, we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination, as all belonging to art. This is not a matter of the ‘reception’ of works of art. Rather, it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced. These are entirely material conditions – performance and exhibition spaces, forms of circulation and reproduction – but also modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them. These conditions make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythms to be felt and thought as art. No matter how emphatically some may oppose the event of art and the creative work of artists to this fabric of institutions, practices, affective modes and thought patterns, the latter allow for a form, a burst of colour, an acceleration of rhythm, a pause between words, a movement, or a glistening surface to be experienced as events and associated with the idea of artistic creation. No matter the insistence with which others oppose the ethereal idealities of art and aesthetics to the very prosaic conditions of their existence, these idealities still provide the markers for the work with which they try to demystify them. Finally, no matter the bitterness others still express at seeing our venerable museums welcome the works of the darlings of the market, this is merely a distant effect of the revolution constituted by the very birth of museums, when the royal galleries open to the public made visible popular scenes that German princes taken with exoticism had bought from dealers in the Netherlands, or when the republican Louvre was stacked with princely portraits and pious paintings looted by the revolutionary armies from Italian palaces or Dutch museums. Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it. This is precisely one of the arguments of this book. It shows how a regime of perception, sensation and interpretation of art is constituted and transformed by welcoming images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art: vulgar figures of genre painting, the exaltation of the most prosaic activities in verse freed from meter, music-hall stunts and gags, industrial buildings and machine rhythms, smoke from trains and ships reproduced mechanically, extravagant inventories of accessories from the lives of the poor. It shows how art, far from foundering upon these intrusions of the prose of the world, ceaselessly redefined itself – exchanging, for example, the idealities of plot, form and painting for those of movement, light and the gaze, building its own domain by blurring the specificities that define the arts and the boundaries that separate them from the prosaic world.

Art is given to us through these transformations of the sensible fabric, at the cost of constantly merging its own reasons with those belonging to other spheres of experience. I have chosen to study these transformations in a certain number of specific scenes. In this sense, a distant model guides *Aisthesis*. Its title echoes Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, which focused on a series of short extracts, from Homer to Virginia Woolf, to study the transformations in the representation of reality in western literature. *Mimesis* and *Aisthesis* undoubtedly take on different meanings here, since they no longer designate categories internal to art, but rather regimes of the identification of art. My scenes are not only taken from the art of writing, but also from the visual and performance arts, and those of mechanical reproduction. They do not show the transformations belonging to any given art. Instead, they show the way in which a given artistic appearance requires changes in the paradigms of art. Each one of these scenes thus presents a singular event, and explores the interpretive network that gives it meaning around an emblematic text. The event can be a performance, a lecture, an exhibition, a visit to a museum or to a studio, a book, or a film release. The network built around it shows how a performance or an object is felt and thought not only as art, but also as a singular artistic proposition and a source of artistic emotion, as novelty and revolution in art – even as a means for art to find a way out of itself. Thus it inscribes them into a moving constellation in which modes of perception and affect, and forms of interpretation defining a paradigm of art, take shape. The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end. For thinking is always firstly thinking the thinkable – a thinking that modifies what is thinkable by welcoming what was unthinkable. The scenes of thought collected here show how a mutilated statue
can become a perfect work, an image of lousy children the representation of the Ideal, somersaulting clowns a flight in the poetic sky, a piece of furniture a temple, a staircase a character, patched overalls a princely garb, the convolutions of a veil a cosmogony, and an accelerated montage of gestures the sensible reality of communism. These metamorphoses are not individual fantasies but the logic of the regime of perception, affection and thought that I have proposed to call the 'aesthetic regime of art.'

The fourteen episodes that follow are so many microcosms in which we see the logic of this regime being formed, transformed, incorporating unexplored territories and forming new patterns in order to do so. Their selection might give rise to some surprise; the reader will seek in vain for landmarks that have become unavoidable in the history of artistic modernity: no Olympia, no Suprematist Composition: White on White, no Fountain, nor Igitur or The Painter of Modern Life. Instead there are reviews of Funambules and the Folies Bergère written by poets who have fallen into the purgatory of literary anthologies, talks by thinkers or critics who have fallen from grace, sketchbooks for stagings rarely performed ... There are surely reasons for this choice, even if, like all good reasons, they are discovered belatedly. Influential histories and philosophies of artistic modernity identify it with the conquest of autonomy by each art, which is expressed in exemplary works that break with the course of history, separating themselves both from the art of the past and the 'aesthetic' forms of prosaic life. Fifteen years of work have brought me to the exact opposite conclusions: the movement belonging to the aesthetic regime, which supported the dream of artistic novelty and fusion between art and life subsumed under the idea of modernity, tends to erase the specificities of the arts and to blur the boundaries that separate them from each other and from ordinary experience. These works only create ruptures by condensing features of regimes of perception and thought that precede them, and are formed elsewhere. The degrees of importance retrospectively granted to artistic events erase the genealogy of forms of perception and thought that were able to make them events in the first place. The scenographic revolutions of the twentieth century are difficult to understand without mentioning the evenings spent at the Funambules or the Folies Bergère by poets that no one reads any more: Théophile Gautier and Théodore de Banville. One would be hard pressed to perceive the paradoxical 'spirituality' of functionalist architecture without referring to Ruskin's 'gothic' reveries -- or even write a somewhat precise history of the modernist paradigm while forgetting that Loie Fuller and Charlie Chaplin contributed to it far more than Mondrian or Kandinsky, or that the legacy of Whitman is as influential as that of Mallarmé.

One could thus consider these episodes, if so inclined, as a counter-history of 'artistic modernity'. However, this book has no encyclopaedic goals. It is not concerned with surveying the field of the arts during two centuries, but only aims to capture the occurrences of certain displacements in the perception of what art signifies. It does follow chronological order from 1764 to 1941. Its point of departure is the historical moment, in Winckelmann's Germany, when Art begins to be named as such, not by closing itself off in some celestial autonomy, but on the contrary by giving itself a new subject, the people, and a new place, history. It follows a few adventures of the relations between these terms. But it has not linked these adventures together; instead it develops a number of overlapping points and elaborations. Nor has it sought to lead them towards some apotheosis or end point. It could surely have come closer to our present. It could also include other episodes, and perhaps will some day. For now, it seemed possible to me to end it at a significant crossroads: a time when, in James Agee's America, the modernist dream of art, capable of lending its infinite resonance to the most minute instant of the most ordinary life, was shedding its last light, the brightest yet, while this very era had just been declared over by the young Marxist critic Clement Greenberg and the monument of retrospective modernism was raised. Failing to find any important art, the latter would however succeed in imposing the golden legend of the avant-gardes and rewrite the history of a century of artistic upheavals to its advantage.

This book is thus both finished and incomplete. It is open to future development, but also allows for the construction of different narratives, which could link these isolated episodes together. By following the path that leads from the Belvedere Torso, the expression of a free people, to sharecroppers' barracks in Alabama, stopping by Murillo's beggar boys, the oil lamps of the Funambules, the urban wanderings of a hungry vagrant, or the nomads filmed by the Kinoks on the frontiers of Soviet Asia, readers will be able to
recognize so many short voyages to the land of the people, to which I have devoted another book. From the mutilated Belvedere statue to the broken china rabbit belonging to the sharecropper’s daughter, via the distorted bodies of the Hanlon Lees brothers, Loie Fuller’s unlocatable body, Rodin’s limbs without bodies and bodies without limbs, and the extreme fragmentation of gestures assembled by Dziga Vertov, they will be able to construct the history of a regime of art like that of a large fragmented body, and of a multiplicity of unknown bodies born from this very fragmentation. They can also follow the multiple metamorphoses of the ancient that the modern feeds upon: how the Olympian gods transform into children of the people, the antique temple into a piece of salon furniture, or into a practicable theatre prop, the painting of a Greek vase becoming a dance celebrating American nature — and still more metamorphoses.

Among these stories, one always imposed itself with greater insistence as the book progressed: the history of the paradoxical links between the aesthetic paradigm and political community. By making the mutilated statue of Hercules the highest expression of the liberty of the Greek people, Winckelmann established an original link between political freedom, the withdrawal of action, and defection from the communitarian body. The aesthetic paradigm was constructed against the representative order, which defined discourse as a body with well-articulated parts, the poem as a plot, and a plot as an order of actions. This order clearly situated the poem — and the artistic productions for which it functioned as a norm — on a hierarchical model: a well-ordered body where the upper part commands the lower, the privilege of action, that is to say of the free man, capable of acting according to ends, over the repetitive lives of men without quality. The aesthetic revolution developed as an unending break with the hierarchical model of the body, the story, and action. The free people, says Schiller, is the people that plays, the people embodied in this activity that suspends the very opposition between active and passive; the little Sevillian beggars are the embodiment of the ideal, says Hegel, because they do nothing; the novel dethroned drama as the exemplary art of speech, bearing witness to the capacity of men and women without quality to feel all kinds of ideal aspirations and sensual frenzies. But it did so at the cost of ruining the model of the story with causes and effects, and of action with means and ends. The theatre itself, the ancient stage of ‘active men’, in order to draw itself closer to art and life, comes to repudiate action and its agents by considering itself a choir, a pictorial fresco, or architecture in movement. Photography consecrates the triumph of the gaze over the hand, and the exemplary cinematic body turns out to be the one that is constantly bombarded by events, none of which are the result of its intentions. The aesthetic paradigm of the new community, of men free and equal in their sensible life itself, tends to cut this community off from all the paths that are normally used to reach a goal. No doubt this tendency towards suspended action is constantly resisted. But this very struggle incessantly reproduces the inertia against which it rises up. In their search for an active theatre or ballet, Diderot and Noverre had to find models in pictorial composition. The same Rousseau who opposed the activity of the civic celebration to the passivity of the spectator in the theatre celebrated the ‘farniente’ of reverie, and with The New Heloise inaugurated the long series of novels without action, devoted to what Borges later called the ‘insipid and idle everyday’. Wagner wanted a living poem that acted instead of describing, but this living poem, made to welcome the figure of the free hero, instead gave way to the figure of the god who turns away from action. The renovators of dance and theatre freed bodily movements from the shackles of a plot, but the emancipation of movement also distanced it from rational, intentional action directed towards an end. Vertov’s film, which sought to replace the plots and characters of yesterday with the living links of activities that formed the sensible fabric of communism, begins and ends in a cinema where the evening’s spectators seem to play with images that present them to themselves as the daytime actors of communism. Emancipated movement does not succeed in reintegrating the strategic patterns of causes and effects, ends and means.

Hasty minds will undoubtedly see this as the sign of an irremediable breach between aesthetic utopia and real political and revolutionary action. Instead, I recognized the same paradox in it as the one I encountered in the practices and theories of social emancipation. Emancipated workers could not repudiate the hierarchical model governing the distribution of activities without

taking distance from the capacity to act that subjected them to it, and from the action plans of the engineers of the future. All these workers could easily have opposed the militants of the Saint-Simonian religion reinstating work, who came to recruit soldiers for the new industrial army, with the ingenuous words spoken by one of them: 'When I think of the beauties of Saint-Simonism, my hand stops.' The fullest expression of the fighting workers' collective was called the general strike, an exemplary equivalence of strategic action and radical inaction. The scientific Marxist revolution certainly wanted to put an end to the workers' reveries, along with utopian programmes. But by opposing them to the effects of real social development, it kept subordinating the end and means of action to the movement of life, at the risk of discovering that this movement does not want anything and does not allow any strategy to lay claim to it. Soviet critics responded to the filmmaker, who presented them with a vision of communism realized as the symphony of linked movements, that his so-called communism was doomed to an endless oscillation between pantheistic adoration of the irrational flux of things and pure formalist voluntarism. But what else could they oppose to this double defect except the return of artists to the old functions of moral illustration, whose inanity Rousseau and Schiller had exposed a century and a half earlier? Was the filmmaker effectively doing anything other than giving his judges a mirror in which they could recognize the dilemma of their science? Social revolution is the daughter of aesthetic revolution, and was only able to deny this relation by transforming a strategic will that had lost its world into a policy of exception.

1. Divided Beauty

_Dresden, 1764_

Abused and mutilated to the utmost, and without head, arms, or legs, as this statue is, it shows itself even now to those who have the power to look deeply into the secrets of art with all the splendor of its former beauty. The artist has presented in this Hercules a lofty ideal of a body elevated above nature, and a shape at the full development of manhood, such as it might be if exalted to the degree of divine sufficiency. He appears here purified from the dross of humanity, and after having attained immortality and a seat among the gods; for he is represented without need of human nourishment, or further use of his powers. No veins are visible, and the belly is made only to enjoy, not to receive, and to be full without being filled. In this position, with the head turned upwards his face probably had a pleased expression as he meditated with satisfaction on the great deeds which he had achieved; this feeling even the back seems to indicate, which is bent, as if the hero was absorbed in lofty reflections. In that powerfully developed chest we behold in imagination the breast against which the giant Geryon was squeezed, and in the length and strength of the thighs we recognize the unwearied hero who pursued and overtook the brazen-footed stag, and travelled through countless lands even to the very confines of the world. The artist may admire in the outlines of this body the perpetual flowing of one form into another, and the undulating lines which rise and fall like waves, and become swallowed up in one another. He will find that no copyist can be sure of correctness, since the undulating movement which he thinks he is following turns imperceptibly away, and leads both the hand and the eye astray by taking another direction. The bones...
thoroughly modified his text for publication in 1844 in the second series of the Essays, it does not seem that the audience assembled under the roof of Boston’s Masonic Temple ever heard this profession of faith. We do not know how it would have received this invitation to abandon English encyclopaedias and the relics of Greek and Roman antiquity to go and find new religion and poetry in the fisheries of the East Coast, the pioneers out West, the prose of daily newspapers, electoral jousting or banking. It is true that the former Unitarian pastor was not new to the art of provocation. He had already urged his audiences more than once to reject the conspiracy of centuries past, and to bid farewell to the policed museums of Europe, to Doric columns and gothic ornaments, in order to fully embrace the present. ‘I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic’, he had already announced, to the shock of the Harvard fellows, ‘what is doing in Italy or Arabia, what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.’ We must thus take note: it was not in London under the glass-and-steel arcs of the Crystal Palace, nor in the fin de siècle Paris of the Eiffel tower, in the New York of skyscrapers or Russia of futurist and constructivist revolutionaries; it was in Boston in 1841, capital of genteel culture, intellectuals and aesthetes enthused by classical philology, French civility, and voyages to Italy for its antique ruins and Renaissance masterpieces, that the modernist ideal, in the strong sense, was first formulated in all its radicalism – the ideal of a new poetry of new man.

But one must also notice where the paradox lies in this declaration. The man who announces it has no personal taste for banking, or electoral stands: he thinks they turn man away from the only worthwhile quest – namely, the accomplishment of his own nature. And if he loves the calm of the countryside, it is so as to be there alone with his thoughts or with kindred spirits, and not in order to get involved with the activities of fishermen or the amusements of lumberjacks. He never travelled to the plantations of the


South. And the conquest of the West, or the recent annexations of Texas and Oregon, were only known to him through newspapers. Their evocation here does not at all have to do with a personal passion for the great adventure of a new people and virgin lands. First of all, it defines change in the poetic paradigm: the poetry of the present time breaks with a certain idea of time, one regulated by great events and rhythms inherited from the past. It finds its material no longer in historical succession, but in geographical simultaneity, in the multiplicity of activities distributed in the diverse spaces of a territory. It finds its form no longer in regular meter inherited from tradition, but in the common pulse that links these activities.

But one must not be mistaken: the common pulse that the new poet must make sensible in the material activities of the new world is itself entirely spiritual. The ideal of the new poet can reject refined muses, and the norm of the ‘American Scholar’ to call for ‘the single man [who] plant[s] himself indomitably on his instincts’. However, in these proud proclamations there is nothing that could be attributed to some naïve materialist intoxication of the pioneering people of the new continent. Quite the contrary: if the new poet can and must take up the materialities of modern America, it is in order to denounce true materialism, which is embodied by the English empiricist and sensualist tradition. This tradition begins by enclosing material things within the limits of utility and abstractions of ownership, before opposing this vulgar world to the select world of spiritual pleasures. Materialism is the dualism that separates the material from the spiritual by separating particular things from the life of the whole. The task of the American poet is to restore the vulgar materialities of the world of work and everyday life to the life of the mind and the whole. It is to contrast the English sensualist aristocracy with the spiritual revolution carried out, during the time of the French Revolution, by German philosophers. They extricated the spiritual life sealed within any sensible reality, awaiting the thought that must liberate it. The call to sing the prosaicness of American life can thus be translated strictly in these seemingly mystic lines that, however, say exactly the same thing:

3 Ibid., p. 69.
We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidity and fugacity of the symbol. As the eyes of Lycaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, though that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or the metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form ... All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form.4

In a few lines, Emerson gives us the epitome of German idealist philosophy – as Coleridge and Carlyle translated it for the Anglophone world, and as it was adapted to their use by these American ‘Transcendentalists’ concerned with a new religion of life, breaking the circle of intellectual and social conformity designated by the conjunction between the American spirit of ownership, Calvinist rigour and Lockean empiricism. The layers of the edifice are easily discernible here. First, there is the double distinction carried out by Kantian transcendental philosophy: on the one hand, the separation of phenomena and things in themselves; on the other, the definition of aesthetic judgment in its double opposition to the law of the understanding that makes things knowable and to the particularity of desire that wants to appropriate them. Kant devoted himself to separating the two distinctions. In contrast, his successors strived to reunite them in order to make aesthetic contemplation the path leading from the finite intellectual determination of phenomena to absolute knowing. But he had facilitated the task for them himself in the passage from the Critique of the Power of Judgment that mentions the cipher language by which nature speaks to us symbolically through its beautiful forms.5 This cipher language had found its immediate echo in reflections by Novalis that made everything into encrypted speech and language itself into a vast poem. It had served the young Schelling to confer a strategic position on artistic knowledge in the System of Transcendental Idealism, at the price of welding the tradition of critical idealism with that of neo-platonic metaphysics: ‘What we speak of as nature is a poem sealed in a mysterious and wonderful script. Yet the riddle could be unveiled, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit, which, strangely deluded, seeks itself, and in seeking flies from itself; for the meaning we seek glimmers through the sensible world, as it does through words, and through the dissolving mists which alone reveal the land of fantasy where our desires are headed. Each beautiful painting is born, as it were, when an invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world is removed ...6

Breaking this barrier separating two worlds was the very principle of the ‘natural supernaturalism’ promoted by Carlyle, and it is still the programme attributed by Emerson to the new poet. The poem is a mirror held up to things, to furnish an image of every created thing. No doubt this mirror ‘carried through the street’7 is a metaphor shared by quite diverse minds: one can find it in almost the same form in the least mystic writer of the time, Stendhal, who himself attributes it to Saint-Réal. But we should try to understand its function here. Surely the mirror should not be considered a reflective surface that gives off reflections of things. It is a polished surface, cleansed of any dross so that things of ordinary utility appear in it cleansed of everything that attaches them to utility and propriety, organized according to the divine order of the ‘procession’ which, according to Plotinus, expresses the supersensible ordering of sensible things. But the opposite is equally true: the ideal world is

---

not another world; it is the same as the one we live in. This is another lesson of the so-called Idealist philosophers: poetry is not a world of rare sentiments felt by exceptional beings and expressed in specific forms. Poetry is the flowering of a form of life, the expression of a poieticity immanent to the ways of life of a people and its individuals. Poetry exists in poems only if it already exists latent in forms of life. It exists in the ‘pre-cantations’ offered by forms of nature: sea, mountainous peak, Niagara, or any bed of flowers whose attuned ear hears and understands the poem and tries to put it into words; in the rhymes presented by the knottiness of seashells, the savage ode of the tempest and the epic song of summer and harvests, but just as well in the blade of grass or the drop of water which is ‘a little ocean’, the meat on the fire, the boiling milk, the shop, the cart and the account book. It exists in the sensations, gestures and attitudes of these peasants, grooms, coachmen, hunters and butchers, who celebrate the symbolic potential of nature in the choice of their life, and not in their choice of words. Finally, it exists in words, of which everyone is a silent poem, the translation of an original relation with those other words that are visible things.

Emerson thus exceeds the thought of the author from whom he borrows his idea of the poet as creator of symbols, namely Carlyle. For the latter, the symbols of the spiritual world present in the natural order were to be found in flags, banners and standards, in works of art, examples of heroic characters and the vestimentary parade of dandies. For Emerson, the symbols of the spiritual world can be found everywhere. The task of the poet is to awaken this potentiality of speech, this potential of common experience of a spiritual world, slumbering in every list of words, as it is in the array of objects, and the deployment of prosaic activities. The poet must reunite words and things, give things the names that express their

---

8 Ibid., p. 15.
9 Emerson, American Scholar, p. 68.
10 Ibid., p. 67.
11 Emerson, The Poet, p. 10.

and the temporal constraint of the poem. Poetry is alive as long as the world has not yet plundered its poeticity, as long as thought has not yet separated the forms of self-knowledge from the world of images, and the rational administration of things from the immediacy of human relations. Faced with the prose of the rationalized world, ideal poetry is condemned to mime its own idea by playing with significations deprived of all substantial content.

The political and poetic nineteenth century may have been nothing but an incessant effort to deny the verdict simultaneously declaring that the long history of poetic forms and the short history of modern revolutionary turmoil were over. Denying this Hegelian verdict means refuting the idea it proposes of the modern world: the idea of a time when thought is finally the conscious contemporary of its world. Our world is not contemporary to its thought: this is the counter-verdict of those who want to confer the task of a necessary revolution on the gathered masses or on the solitary poet. Whoever wants to give a meaning to the word modernity must take this into account: modernism — artistic and political — is not the blissful affirmation of the greatness of work, electricity, cement and speed. It is first of all a counter-affirmation about modernity: it denies that the contemporary world has its own thought and that contemporary thought has its world. In fact, this counter-affirmation contains two theses. The first one is a thesis of separation: the contemporary world is structured by a separation that must be abolished. Here the subjective richness of assembled humanity remains foreign to humans, frozen in dogmas of revealed religion, the mechanics of state administration or the product of work appropriated by capital; the signs of the future are still ciphered there in the fossils of past revolutions or barbarous hieroglyphics of industrial and colonizing innovation. The revolution to come is the conscious reappropriation of this subjective richness fixed in the objective world and the deciphering of these enigmatic signs. ‘This is a confession, nothing more’, the young Marx wrote to Ruge in a September 1843 letter that fixes the programme of revolutionary modernity at the same time as that of the Franco-German Annals. He certainly ignored and would probably always ignore that in the previous year, on the other side of the Atlantic, another student of post-Kantian idealism had fixed the task of the new poet in the same terms:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labour, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression ... For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.14

The separation thesis thus doubles as a thesis of non-contemporaneity: the modern world is characterized by a gap between temporalities. It was the young Marx again who determined its political formula in 1843 Germany: the revolution to come finds both its premonition and its task in a double absence of contemporaneity. German philosophy elaborated a theory of human liberation which was already beyond the French political revolution but which did not have — whatever academic Hegelians may say — any correlate in the miserable, feudal and bureaucratic reality of contemporary Germany. The German revolution would thus be able to skip over the French step of political revolutions in order to become a human revolution directly. But it would only be able to do so on one condition: namely, that it would appropriate this energy of the active transformation of the world that the French revolutionary fighters were once able and could still deploy without being able to give it any theoretical formulation at the level of the age and of their action.

By contrast, the Emersonian revolution does not propose any collective emancipation. It entrusts exemplary individuals with the task of giving the meaning and enjoyment of spiritual and sensible wealth to a community. The poet ‘stands among partial men for the complete man’;15 he is the one to reattach words to things, for the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.14

He is a complete man only by his capacity to attach each particular sensible form and each word of language to the breath of the whole. And he draws this power only from his ability to nourish himself

14 Ibid., pp. 4–7.
15 Ibid., p. 4.
16 Ibid., p. 15.
with the potential latent in collective experience, to read the hieroglyphics inscribed in the savage and multiform nature of the new continent, but also in the features and gestures of hybrid multitudes that explore and reclaim it. The America of happy lumberjacks and fierce conquerors of virgin lands, where a disparate crowd was summoned not long ago to verbal jousting over these common affairs – which the Founding Fathers had wanted to entrust to enlightened landowners – and where the free spirits of the Bostonian gentry came across slaves fleeing Southern plantations, this land of chaos and contrast indeed offers an image of modernity entirely opposed to the modernity of the Prussian administration defined by Berlin philosophy. Here, more than elsewhere, the contemporary affirms itself as a shock between heterogeneous temporalities, and as a radical gap between spirituality in search of a body and material effervescence in search of thought. Here, more than elsewhere, the task of the new poet can once again find, over the ashes of academic Hellenism, the concrete potency of Homeric poetry, which simultaneously expresses the savage anger of Achilles, the man of war, and the multiplicity of activities represented on his shield. Finally, here more than elsewhere, the task of the poet can be identified with the construction of a community in possession of its own meaning.

The new poet, the modern poet, is the one who can express the spiritual substance present in the barbarity of America in gestation; to express this common spiritual potential is to manifest the symbolic nature of all material reality, as well as any prosaic naming. The symbol is not the figurative expression of abstract thought. It is the fragment detached from the whole that carries the potential of the whole, that bears it on the condition that one draw it out of its solitude as a material thing, that one link it to other fragments and that one circulate air – which is the breath of the whole – in between these fragments. Poetry to come could thus be characterized by two seemingly contradictory concepts: one could call it idealist, for it strives to define the spiritual potential hidden in the diversity of things and material activities. One could call it materialist, for it does not concede any world of its own to spirituality – it recognizes it only as the link that unites sensible forms and activities. One could call it symbolist, for in the table of sensible things, it only shows a copy of a text written in ‘the alphabet of the stars’. One could call it unanimist, for it makes clear that something is poetic only if it is attached to the living totality that it expresses. No doubt, the two adjectives express poetic differences. Symbolist poetics singularizes a third element that lends its potency to a series of assembled forms: a ‘third, fusible aspect’ that suggests, for Mallarmé, ‘the exact relation between images’; a ‘third character’, representing the world of the soul, whose presence Maeterlinck underlines in the banal dialogue of certain characters in Ibsen who seem to talk about rain and good weather in a dead man’s room’. Unanimist poetics, on the contrary, entrusts the multiplicity of words and assembled forms alone with the potential to represent its own infinity. But both one and the other, from the time of Mallarmé to Dziga Vertov, would often mix their forms and their effects for two reasons. First of all, symbolist poetics is an egalitarian poetics: it gives everything and every material relation the power to symbolize what the poetic tradition limited to a few privileged relations. Secondly, both rely on the same idea of poetic capacity – that is, the power to ‘explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact’, and to find in every sensible form the supersensible potential, the potential for infinitization, which carries it beyond itself. This beyond can be the endless ‘procession’ of beings equally carried away in the same movement; it can be the ‘third fusible aspect’ which detaches itself from the relation of elements. But in both cases, the material object is torn from the limits of egotistical usage, made into the bearer of a common potential that is its emblem: the emblem of a community possessing the spirit of its material life or the sensible materiality of its idea. The poem makes everything into more than a thing, but it does so insofar as it is itself more than art – another economy, another circulation established between subjects, words, and things.

19 Jules Huret, ‘Conversation avec M. Maurice Maeterlinck’, Le Figure, 17 May 1893.
This complicity between symbolist spirituality and unanimism — whether democratic or communist — had been given its formula by an attentive reader of Emerson. Its inventor was Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* was hailed in 1855, in a letter from Emerson, as 'the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed'.\(^{21}\) We know that Emerson's friends and the Bostonian intelligentsia were moved by the support given by such a distinguished mind to a work whose vulgarity and 'ithyphallic audacity' insulted 'what is most sacred and decent among men',\(^{22}\) and that Emerson himself did not much appreciate seeing his work used to promote the second edition. But this rerouting of a thank you note is itself only small change in a much more radical transaction. The work itself seems to have been conceived as the exact response to the philosopher's call, as an exact embodiment of the program sketched out by the propositions of the 1841 Boston lecture, by someone who had only been an inoffensive New York journalist until then: the programme of the new poet who would measure up to the immeasurable American people and territory, the new poet capable of expressing the living poem that they constitute. Whitman tells us he throws his 'barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world'. But this barbaric manifesto itself is only the extreme version, the deliberately 'barbarized' version of an idea of poetry elaborated by the best philosophical minds and the highest poetic spirits, from Schiller to Emerson, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, and a few others. Surely, even if the famous description of Achilles' shield serves as a distant model, no one had ever seen such an extravagant succession of prosaic activities and tools, this gallery of insignificant, vulgar or horrible genre scenes, offered up as a poetic work. Thus, in the first of the poems, the one that will become the *Song of Myself*, the farmer contemplating his oats, the lunatic carried to the asylum, the printer with gaunt jaws turning his quid of tobacco, the malformed limbs of a bloodied body tied to the anatomist's table, the removed parts falling off into a pail with a horrible sound, the quadroon girl

---


monetary estimations of the market: the value of equality that they get from all being microcosms of the whole, susceptible of being attached to the interminable chain of beings, to the inexhaustible life of the whole.

The 'auctioneer's catalogue' is thus a counter-catalogue that annuls the difference between use and exchange value by returning each thing to its place. This place denies the ancient hierarchy of positions in which each person had to do 'his own business', to take each thing and each act in the great 'procession' of irreducibly material and spiritual realities. The interminable display of vulgar objects and activities is the strict application of the spiritualist principle articulated by Emerson: the symbolic use of nature abolishes distinctions of low and high, honest and vile. 'Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. The meaner the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men.'24 And the same vertigo of common names of common things follows Emerson's indication on the role of the poet as a giver of names, the suggestive value of 'bare lists of words' borrowed from a dictionary for 'an imaginative and excited mind', and the fact that 'what would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illustrious, spoken in a new connexion of thought'.25 The 'catalogue' is the linking, and it is the linking that redeems all ugliness and all vulgarity:

For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole ... dispenses very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider's geometrical web.26

The infinite multiplication of activities, things and vulgar names is thus the accomplishment of a spiritual task of redemption.

The interminable inventory cannot be relegated to a materialist myopia glued to the immediacy of facts and objects. Nor can the triumphal affirmation of the one who sings himself be relegated to the naive egotism of a proud inhabitant of the new individualistic world. Above all, it is related to the vast redemption of the empirical world proclaimed by German idealism: the redemption of a sensible world where spirit recognizes the exterior form of a divine thought that it knows from now on as its own thought. The initial declaration of the collection expresses this primordial reversal, and not some silly uncouth Yankee arrogance: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume.'27 The formula does not simply translate Emerson's formula affirming that 'All men have my blood, and I have all men.'28 It puts to work, more profoundly, the Emersonian virtue of 'self-reliance', which is no self-infatuation but the knowledge that 'there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works'.29 Also, this self-affirmation goes along with the erasure of the poet's proper name. No author's name appears on the cover of the collection. The name 'Walt Whitman' appears only once in the body of the text — that is to say, at once in its centre and lost within its mass. It is qualified as 'one of the roughs' and 'a kosmos' — that is to say, as a microcosm of the community. Putting oneself at the centre of all things is to thereby affirm this universal intellectual capacity, which most people renounce practising. It is to undo the chains by which things are held in the utilitarian and monetary order and individuals held in the role that society expects of them. In an earlier version, the proud self-affirmation was found in a declaration of emancipation:

24 Emerson, 'The Poet', p. 11.
26 Emerson, 'The Poet', p. 11.
27 Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p. 51.
29 Ibid., p. 35.
The poet of the new world

I am your voice—It was tied in you—In me it begins to talk.
I celebrate myself to celebrate every man and woman alive;
I loosen the tongue that was tied in them,
It begins to talk out of my mouth.30

The absolute immanence of the 'I' to all things is also the means of giving the nearest things the beauty and the marvellous character reserved until then for distant things.31 It is the means for suppressing the very difference between close and far, for bringing the distant closer by rendering what is close infinite. This bringing closer is a matter of breath, of shared respiration. The poem establishes this community from the beginning by linking the emanations of all things to the poet's breathing, and the poem's words to the very breathing of the things it speaks about:

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark colour'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms ...32

In one of those anonymous articles where he celebrates his coming, the poet is not mistaken to award himself the praise of being the 'true spiritualist'.33 The true spiritualist is the one who exactly identifies the manifestation of spirit in the respiration of bodies which takes all things into its cycle and thus delivers the truth—the becoming flesh and spirit—waiting there. He is the one who

31 Emerson, 'American Scholar', p. 68.
32 Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p. 51.

erases everything that could arrest this continual breath of spirit/respiration. This is why the collection bears its author's name only as a name uttered by the breath of the poem. This is why the name on the cover page is replaced by a full-length portrait: the portrait of a body well planted on its feet and 'depending on its instincts', able to exchange its health with the health of common things. One of the first commentators underlines the pertinence of this substitution as a transcendental principle: 'As seems very proper in a book of transcendental poetry, the author withdraws his name from the title page, and presents his portrait, nearly engraved on steel, instead. This, no doubt, is upon the principle that the name is merely accidental; while the portrait affords an idea of the essential being from whom these utterances proceed.34 Following the same logic, the collection is named Leaves of Grass. The title not only affirms the poetic thesis that governs it: all things are equal because the most infinitesimal contains the universe: 'I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars.'35 It incarnates this egalitarian procession in its very layout: the pages of a book must be considered like the detached leaves of any tree whatsoever, emanations of universal anonymous life. Before Mallarmé, Whitman asks the 'symbolist' question par excellence: How can the book be the sensible reality of its own idea? The 'pure' poet will not find a more subtle means than to imitate the starry sky through the arrangement of lines on the page. The rude Long Island native takes things more at the root: instead of asking printed paper to imitate the subject of the poem, he asks it simply to imitate the potential it expresses: the potential of the continual procession of material realities traversed by their spirit. Strictly speaking, this means the poem neither begins nor ends. The pages of the preface are presented in columns, imitating the layout of daily newspapers. And the preface is not announced as such but starts as the continuation of a speech that has always already begun. If the first letter is capitalized, it is uniquely because it belongs to the proper name that this poem expresses, and that is expressed within it: America. The collection of poems, for one, does not include any division. At most, the time of a deeper breath separates the twelve poems—of extremely varying length, and none

of which has a title — from one another. In a single continuous flow of sixty pages, the first poem emits what the future *Song of Myself* would distribute into fifty-two sections. And above all the poet invented an unprecedented verbal form for the great procession of common things and beings. It would be called the 'prose poem', and its precedents were sought here and there: in America, in the morals of the popular *Proverbial Philosophy* by Martin Farquhar Tupper; in France, in the pictorial evocations of Aloysius Bertrand, a supposed precursor of Baudelaire. After Baudelaire, poetized prose expressed the sinuous twists and turns of the big city, and the poetry at work in the prosaic world. But what Whitman invents, for America, is more radical than the flexibility of the serpentine line, dear to the English. As he deploys it, the 'prose poem' is a mode of written speech that refutes the dilemma the philosophy teacher poses to Monsieur Jourdain. Like Molière's stubborn fabric salesman, the poet of plebeian America wants neither 'verse nor prose': neither the account book that maintains things in their commodity value, nor the poetic speech that separates its chosen subjects and rhythms from commonplace occupations. The modernist axiom — at the time it still carries the unwieldy name, 'transcendentalist' — can be summed up here: there is a mode of presenting common things that subtracts them both from the logic of the economic and social order and from the artificiality of poetic exception. In order to guarantee material reality, Whitman breaks both the conventional closure of verse and the continuity ('universal reportage') of ordinary prose. He invents an unprecedented punctuation: these ellipses that the first paragraph of the 'preface' spectacularly imposes and that the poems will continue. The ellipses are the practical punctuation of this 'neither ... nor', this 'neither verse nor prose' that claims to express the spiritual truth of things, their belonging to the whole manifested by their ability to create links. This is a suspended linkage: these ellipses disunite the micro-events of ordinary life in order to reunite them in the continuity of the living poem. They are the visible figure of the Idea, the figure of Infinity that reunites by disuniting all vulgar things in its interiority.

The ellipses would disappear in later editions that gave the poems titles and organized them into sections. They nonetheless remain one of the first and most significant attempts at writing and visualizing the poem of 'modern life'. For Whitman's novelty effectively inaugurates a double legacy: the new poem is the poem brought nearer to life in two ways. On the one hand, it is the interiorized poem: the description of the world's spectacles is repeated in the movement of speech, the movement of speech brought back from the letter towards its living spirit, towards the breath from which it comes. But on the other hand, it is spirit outside itself, made visible in the new arrangement of the page. On the one hand, Whitman's 'free verse' could serve as a model for the symbolist search for rhythm subtracted from the material constraints of traditional verse, apt at expressing the ideality of poetic emotion. Symbolist poets — Vícké-Griffin in France, Balmont in Russia — were among the ranks of Whitman's introducers. But it was the naturalist or unanimist reaction that set the excessively pale symbolist idealities against the poet of flesh, large cities, and teeming life. Later the propagandists of young Soviet Russia widely distributed Korney Chukovsky's translation, to the point of making fliers from it in order to boost the morale of the soldiers of the Russian army and the workers of the industrial reconstruction. But next to these poems transformed into propaganda tracts for combatants, there was the edition published in 1923 in Petrograd, with its futurist cover on which the Cyrillic letters making up Walt Whitman's name danced before a background of sky-scrapers, between the stars of the American flag and the accordion folds of the red flag. The spiritual and materialist poem of modern life is also the poem that abolishes the separation between the signs of speech and graphic images. Hence the Whitmanian legacy, surely an unexpected legacy for Emerson, is not limited to verses adopted by poets in Claudel's time; it can also be found in the paintings, drawings or posters by cubists and futurists, which mix linguistic signs with the outlines of forms to identify them either with the painting of the modern city or with the impulse towards the future of the workers' homeland. This explains why, more than once, the frenetic rhythms of Whitmanian lyricism would contaminate the rigorous constructions of the Soviet avant-garde directors who were working to make cinema the language of the dialectic. Daiga Vertov could accuse Eisenstein of misappropriating montage from the Kino-eye to restore bourgeois

---

narrative cinema. In turn, Eisenstein could denounce the accumulative, non-dialectical character of Vertovian montage. But one thing is certain: the montage of Man with a Movie Camera which sweeps up the manicurist’s gestures, magicians’ tricks and miners’ labour in the same accelerated rhythm owes more to A Song of Occupations or to the Song of the Broad Axe, than to Capital. And the dialectic of The General Line receives its demonstrative force only in the torrents of milk or the frenzy of reapers carried away by the Whitmanian rhythm. The production revolution is expressed in the forms of the new poem only if it momentarily forgets the distance separating the revolutionary editorialist of the Franco-German Annals from the transcendentalist lecturer of Boston.

Dear reader, savor this book, without losing a single syllable, for it will teach you about the most interesting people that the century has produced; these admirable mimes and gymnasts, the Hanlon Lees who, while everybody bends towards the ground, saying that crawling is good, do not consent to crawl and instead fly towards the azure, towards infinity, towards the stars! They thus console us and redeem us from vile resignation and universal platitude. They do not speak — no just Gods! — due to a lack of thought, but they know that outside daily life, speech must be used only to express heroic and divine things. Admirable mimes, I have said, yes, even after Deburau and even in the country that produced Deburau, because like him they have mobile faces, the rapid idea that transfigures them, the flash of the gaze and the smile, the mute voice that knows how to say it all, and, more than that, they have this agility that enables them to fuse desire and action in one single movement, which frees them from ignoble gravity. Like Jean Gaspard, they have a comedian's face, but it might not be that way; in fact, just as Deburau's grimace gave the impression and the illusion of agility, they too could give the illusion of thought by the rapidity and the rhythmic precision of their movements.

I love them with the strictest bias, because they are entirely allies and accomplices of the poet, and because they pursue the same goal as the poet himself. Originally the human being was triple; he contained three beings within himself: a man, a beast, and a god. To the sociability that made man, he added instinct, running, naive grace, innocence, sharp and perfect senses, the joyful leap, the surety of