

I

The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic



I have had to struggle here with my dearest aesthetic impressions, endeavouring to push intellectual honesty to its ultimate, cruellest limits.

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The multiple responses that philosophers, linguists, semiologists and art historians have given to the question of the specificity of literature ('literariness'), poetry ('poeticity') or the work of art in general, and to the question of the properly aesthetic perception they call for, all concur in stressing the properties of gratuity, the absence of function, the primacy of form over function, disinterestedness and so on. Here I will not evoke all those definitions that are merely variants of Kantian analysis, such as Strawson's, according to which the work of art has as its function not to have a function, or that of T. E. Hulme, for whom artistic contemplation is a 'detached interest'.¹ Instead I will be content with giving an ideal-typical example of these efforts to constitute as a universal essence – at the price of a *double dehistoricization*, of both the work and the gaze at the work – what is in fact a very particular experience of the work of art, one very evidently situated in social space and in historical time. According to Harold Osborne, the aesthetic attitude is characterized by the concentration of attention (it '*frames apart*' the perceived object from its environment), by the suspension of discursive and analytic activities (it ignores the sociological and historical context), by disinterested-

ness and detachment (it sets aside past and future preoccupations) and, finally, by indifference to the existence of the object.²

Analysis of essence and illusion of the absolute

If these analyses of essence agree on what is the essential, it is because what they have in common is to take as object – whether tacitly or explicitly (such as those analyses claiming to derive from phenomenology) – the subjective experience of the work of art which is that of the analyst, meaning of a cultivated person of a certain society, but they do so without paying attention to the *historicity* of this experience or of the object to which it is applied. This means that they effect, unwittingly, a *universalization of the particular case*, and in the same way constitute a particular experience, situated and dated, of the work of art as a transhistoric *norm* of all artistic perception. Concomitantly they pass over in silence the question of the *historical and social conditions of possibility* of this experience; they exclude, in effect, the analysis of the conditions under which works considered as worthy of the aesthetic gaze were produced and constituted as such; and equally, they ignore the question of the conditions under which the aesthetic disposition they call for is produced (phylogenesis) and continually reproduced in the course of time (ontogenesis). But only this double analysis could take account both of the nature of aesthetic experience and of that illusion of universality which accompanies it, and which such analyses of essence naively register.

It would be necessary, to be perfectly convincing, to submit to detailed examination some examples of the efforts made by modern abstractors of quintessence to disengage the pure essence of the work of art, to define for example, with Jakobson, what makes a verbal message a literary work. And also to show how they enclose themselves within the alternative (or vicious circle) of subjectivism or realism (for which the lover provides the formula: 'Is she pretty because I love her, or do I love her because she is pretty?'): must we say that it is the aesthetic point of view which creates the artistic object, or rather that it is the specific and intrinsic properties of the work of art which give rise to aesthetic experience – a literary one for example – in the reader capable of reading them adequately, that is, aesthetically, or, in more precise terms, capable of considering the message in and for itself?³ This vicious circle is evident with Wellek and Warren, who define literature by the intrinsic properties of the message, while elsewhere specifying the properties which the 'competent reader' must possess to satisfy the requirements of the work in apprehending it aesthetically.⁴ As for Panofsky, he apparently manages to get off the hook because he accompanies his analyses of essence with historical references. If the work of art is indeed, as he says, 'what demands to be perceived aesthetically', and if any object, natural as well as artificial, may be apprehended according to an aesthetic intention,

meaning in its form rather than its function, then how may we avoid the conclusion that it is the aesthetic intention which makes the aesthetic object? And how can we make such a definition operational? Do we not observe that it is almost impossible to determine at what moment the worked-on-object becomes a work of art, when exactly, for example, a letter becomes 'literary', that is, at what moment form prevails over function? Does this mean that the difference inheres in the intention of the author? But this intention, like the intention of the reader or the spectator, moreover, is itself the object of socialization conventions which converge to define the always uncertain and historically changing boundary between the simple utensil and the work of art: 'Classic taste demanded that private letters, legal speeches and the shields of heroes should be *artistic* [. . .] while modern taste demands that architecture and ashtrays should be "functional" . . .'⁵

There is undoubtedly no better confirmation of the almost universal acceptance – at least among the bearers of university titles – of the assumptions underlying the aesthetic *doxa* than the fact that the Wittgensteinian philosophers who are the quickest to flush out the *essentialist fallacy* in classical definitions of the poetic or of the literary will nevertheless invoke here and there, as if inadvertently, the 'gratuitousness of the work of art' and its absence of function, or the 'disinterested perception of things', among the most universally endorsed formalist commonplaces (within the confines of cultivated circles, of course).⁶

But, to escape this aporia, is it sufficient to assert, with Arthur Danto,⁷ that the basis of the difference between works of art and ordinary objects is none other than an institution, to wit, the 'art world' which confers on them the status of candidates for aesthetic appreciation? This is a terse assertion, and if a sociologist may be permitted such a judgement, rather 'sociological'; born once again out of a singular experience which is too quickly universalized, it only designates the fact of the *institution* (in the active sense) of the work of art. It overlooks the historical and sociological analysis of the genesis and structure of the institution (the artistic field) which is capable of accomplishing such an act of institution, that is, of imposing the *recognition* of the work of art as such among all those (*and only those*) who (like the philosopher visiting a museum) have been constituted (through the effort of socialization, which also has to be analysed in terms of its social conditions and logic) in such a fashion that (as their entry into a museum attests) they are disposed to recognize as artistic and to apprehend as such the works socially designated as artistic (notably by their exhibition in a museum). (I have put between parentheses, for the fun of it, some of those things philosophers put between parentheses without realizing it . . .)

All this means that one cannot divide a science of works into two

parts, one devoted to production, the other to perception. The principle of reflexivity automatically asserts itself here: the science of the production of the work of art, that is, of the progressive emergence of a relatively autonomous field of production providing itself with its own market, and of a production which, being its own end, asserts the absolute primacy of form over function, is also for that very reason the science of the emergence of the 'pure aesthetic disposition, capable of privileging in the works thus produced (and potentially, in everything in the world) the form over the function.

What the analysis of essence forgets are the social conditions of the production (or the invention) and of the reproduction (or the inculcation) of dispositions and classificatory schemas which are activated in artistic perception – the social conditions of that kind of *historical transcendental* which is the condition of the aesthetic experience which naively describes it. The understanding of the particular relationship with the work of art which consists of an immediate comprehension born of familiarity relies on the analyst using himself to gain an understanding which is inaccessible to a simple phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of the work, to the extent that this experience relies on the active forgetting of the history which has produced it. It is only by mobilizing all the resources of the social sciences that one can bring to fruition that historicist form of the transcendental project which consists of reappropriating, by historical anamnesis, the historical forms and categories of artistic experience.

Although it appears to itself like a gift of nature, the eye of the nineteenth-century art-lover is the product of history. From the angle of phylogenesis, the pure gaze capable of apprehending the work of art as it demands to be apprehended (in itself and for itself, as form and not as function) is inseparable from the appearance of producers motivated by a pure artistic intention, itself indissociable from the emergence of an autonomous artistic field capable of posing and imposing its own goals in the face of external demands; and it is also inseparable from the corresponding appearance of a population of 'amateurs' or 'connoisseurs' capable of applying to the works thus produced the 'pure' gaze which they call for. And from the angle of ontogenesis, it is associated with very particular conditions of training, such as the precocious frequenting of museums and the prolonged exposure to school teaching and especially to the *skholè* as a form of leisure, and the distance with respect to the constraints and urgencies of necessity which such training presupposes. This means, it must be said in passing, that an analysis of essence which passes these conditions over in silence tacitly elevates into a universal norm

of all practice claiming to be aesthetic these particular properties of an experience which is in fact the product of privilege.

What the ahistorical analysis of the work of art and of aesthetic experience really describes is an *institution* which, as such, enjoys a kind of twofold existence, in things and in minds. In things, it exists in the form of an artistic field, a relatively autonomous social universe which is the result of a slow process of emergence. In minds, it exists in the form of dispositions which invent themselves through the very movement of self-invention of the field to which they are adjusted. When things and dispositions are directly in accord with each other, meaning when the eye is the product of the field to which it relates, then everything appears to be immediately endowed with meaning and value. This is so clearly the case that in order for a totally extraordinary question to be posed about the foundation of the meaning and value of the work of art, something usually taken for granted by all those who swim like fish in the water of the cultural world, an experience has to arise which a cultivated person finds totally exceptional – even though it is, on the contrary, totally ordinary, as empirical observation shows,⁸ for those who have not had the occasion or the chance to acquire the dispositions objectively required by the work of art. An example is Arthur Danto's visit to the exhibition of Warhol's Brillo boxes at the Stable Gallery, when he discovered the arbitrary (*ex instituto*, as Leibniz would have said) character of the imposition of value carried out by the field through exhibition in a place both consecrated and capable of consecrating.⁹

The experience of the work of art as immediately endowed with meaning and value is an effect of the harmony between the two aspects of the same historical institution, the cultivated *habitus* and the artistic field, which mutually ground each other. Given that the work of art does not exist as such, meaning as an object symbolically endowed with meaning and value, unless it is apprehended by spectators possessing the aesthetic disposition and competence which it tacitly requires, one could say that it is the eye of the aesthete which constitutes the work of art – but only if one immediately remembers that it can only do so to the extent that it is itself the product of a long collective history, that is, of the progressive invention of the 'connoisseur', and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art. This relation of circular causality, that of belief and the sacred, characterizes any institution which can only function if it is established simultaneously within the objectivity of a social game and within dispositions ready to enter into the game and participate in it. Museums could say at their gates – but they do not need to, since it so goes without saying – 'Let no

one enter here unless they are lovers of art.' The game makes up the *illusio*, the investment in the game by the informed player who, possessing a sense of the game because made by the game, plays the game, and thereby makes it exist.

It is clear that one does not need to choose between, on the one hand, the subjectivism of theories of the 'aesthetic consciousness' which reduce the aesthetic quality of a natural thing or a human work to a simple correlate of a purely contemplative attitude of consciousness, neither theoretical nor practical, and on the other hand an ontology of the work of art such as that proposed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. Questions of the meaning and value of the work of art, like the question of the specificity of aesthetic judgement, can only find solutions in a social history of the field, linked to a sociology of the conditions of the constitution of the particular disposition which the field calls for in each of its states.

Historical anamnesis and the return of the repressed

What makes a work of art a work of art and not a mundane thing or a simple utensil? What makes an artist an artist, as opposed to a craftsman or a Sunday painter? What makes a urinal or a bottle rack that is exhibited in a museum into a work of art? Is it the fact that it is signed by Duchamp, a recognized artist (and recognized first and foremost *as* an artist) and not by a wine merchant or a plumber? But is that not simply replacing the work-of-art-as-fetish with the 'fetish of the name of the master' of which Benjamin spoke? Who, in other words, has created the 'creator' as a recognized producer of fetishes? And what confers its magic efficacy on his name, whose celebrity is the measure of his pretension to exist as an artist? What makes the affixing of his name, like the label of a famous designer, multiply the value of the object (which helps to raise the stakes in attribution disputes and to establish the power of experts)? Where does the ultimate principle reside of the effect of nomination or of theory (a particularly appropriate word since it is a matter of seeing, *theorein*, and of giving to be seen) – that ultimate principle which, by introducing difference, division and separation, produces the sacred?

Such questions are analogous in type to those raised by Mauss in his *Theory of Magic*, when he pondered on the principle of magic's effectiveness and found himself moving back from the instruments employed by the sorcerer to the sorcerer himself, and from there to the belief of his clients, and little by little back to the whole social universe amidst which magic is evolved and practised. But in the

infinite regress towards the primary cause and the ultimate foundation of the work of art's value, one must stop somewhere. And in order to explain this sort of miracle of transubstantiation which is the source of the work of art's existence – and which, though commonly forgotten, is brutally recalled through moves à la Duchamp – one must replace the ontological question with the historical question of the genesis of the universe in which the value of the work of art is ceaselessly produced and reproduced in a veritable continuous creation – that is, the artistic field.

The analysis of essence merely records the outcome of the analysis which history itself has performed objectively through the process of autonomization of the field and through the progressive invention by agents (artists, critics, historians, curators, experts, etc.) of techniques and concepts (genres, mannerisms, periods, styles, etc.) which are characteristic of this universe. The science of works will not free itself completely from an 'essentialist' vision unless it successfully carries out a historical analysis of the genesis of those central figures in the artistic game, the artist and the expert, and of the dispositions they put to work in the production and reception of works of art. Notions which have become obvious and banal such as those of the artist or 'creator', like the very words which designate and constitute them, are the products of a long historical process.

This is often forgotten by art historians themselves when they ponder the emergence of the artist in the modern sense of the term, still without avoiding completely the trap of 'essentialist thought' inscribed in the use (always haunted by anachronism) of historically invented, and therefore dated, words. Unable to question everything implicitly involved in the modern notion of the artist, and in particular the professional ideology of the uncreated 'creator' which evolved throughout the nineteenth century, they stop at the apparent object, meaning the artist (or, elsewhere, the writer, the philosopher, the scholar), instead of constructing and analysing the field of production of which the artist, socially instituted as a 'creator', is the product. They do not see that the ritual inquiry concerning the place and time of the appearance of the figure of the artist (as opposed to the craftsman) in fact leads back to the question of the economic and social conditions of the gradual constitution of an artistic field capable of grounding belief in the quasi-magical powers attributed to the artist.

It is not merely a matter of exorcizing the 'fetish of the name of the master' by a simple sacrilegious and slightly childish inversion – whether one wishes it or not, the name of the master is indeed a fetish. Rather, it is a matter of describing the gradual emergence of

the entire set of social mechanisms which make possible the figure of the artist as producer of that fetish which is the work of art – in other words, the constitution of the artistic field (in which analysts and art historians themselves are included) as the locus where belief in the value of art – and in that power to create value which belongs to the artist – is constantly produced and reproduced. This leads to surveying not only the indices of the artist's autonomy (such as those revealed through the analysis of contracts, like the appearance of the signature, affirmations of the artist's specific competence, recourse in cases of dispute to arbitration by peers, etc.), but also the indices of the field's autonomy, such as the emergence of a set of specific institutions which are required for the functioning of the economy of cultural goods – places of exhibition (galleries, museums, etc.); institutions of consecration (academies, salons, etc.), institutions for the reproduction of producers (art schools, etc.), and specialized agents (dealers, critics, art historians, collectors, etc.), endowed with the *dispositions* objectively required by the field and with *specific categories of perception and appreciation* which are irreducible to those in common use and which are capable of imposing a specific measure on the value of artists and their products.

As long as painting is measured by surface covered or by length of labour, or by the quantity and price of the raw materials used (gold or ultramarine paints), the artist-painter is not radically different from a house painter. This is why, among all the inventions which accompany the emergence of the field of production, one of the most important is undoubtedly the elaboration of a properly artistic language: first a way of naming painters and of speaking about them and about the nature and the mode of remunerating their work, and through this elaborating an autonomous definition of properly artistic value, irreducible as such to strictly economic value; and also, in the same way, a way of speaking about painting itself, using appropriate words, often pairs of adjectives, which enable one to talk about the specificity of pictorial technique, the *manifattura*, even the particular manner of a painter, which it helps to make exist socially by naming it. By the same logic, the discourse of celebration, especially the biography, plays a determining role, probably less by what it says about painters and their work than by the fact of establishing the painter as a memorable figure, one worthy of a historical account, like a statesman or poet (we know that the ennobling comparison – *ut pictura poesis* – contributes (at least for a while, until it becomes a hindrance) to the affirmation of the irreducibility of pictorial art).

A genetic sociology should also include in its model the action of producers themselves, their claim to the right to be the sole judges of

pictorial production, to make their own criteria for the perception and appreciation of their products. It should take into account the effect exercised on them and on the image they have of themselves and their production (and thereby, the effect exercised on their actual production) by the images of painters and their production which comes back to them from other agents engaged in the field – other artists but also critics, clients, patrons, collectors, etc. (One may assume, for example, that the interest which certain collectors started to take in sketches and cartoons from the quattrocento on could only have helped to exalt the impression the artist had of his own dignity.)

The history of the specific institutions which are indispensable to artistic production should be backed up with a history of the institutions which are indispensable to consumption, and hence to the production of consumers and in particular, of *taste*, as disposition and as competence. The inclination of the 'expert' to consecrate a part of his or her time to the contemplation of works of art for the sole purpose of the pleasure to be enjoyed from them cannot become an essential dimension of the lifestyle of the gentleman or the aristocrat (increasingly identified, at least in England and France, with the person of taste) without the whole collective labour necessary to produce the instruments of the cult of the work of art: one thinks of notions such as 'good taste', undergoing constant elaboration, or of designations like *virtuoso*, borrowed from the Italian, or *connoisseur*, taken from the French, characterizing and producing figures in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England who are able to boast an art of living freed from the utilitarian and basely material ends to which 'vulgar' people sacrifice themselves. But one must also take into account practices as highly ritualized as the 'Grand Tour', a cultural pilgrimage lasting several years and culminating in a visit to Italy and Rome, which constitutes the almost obligatory crowning achievement of their studies for the children of the great aristocracy of England and elsewhere; we must consider as well the institutions offering, usually for payment, cultural products to a broader and broader public, the specialized periodical publications, magazines and works of criticism, literary and artistic newspapers and weeklies, private galleries (gradually converted into museums), annual exhibitions, guidebooks aimed at visitors to the painting and sculpture collections of aristocratic palaces or museums, public concerts and so forth.

Besides the fact they foster the growth of a *public* for cultural works, which is thereby given the means (and required) to acquire a cultivated disposition, *public* institutions like museums, which have no other purpose than to offer for contemplation works often

produced with quite other destinations in mind (such as religious paintings, dance or ceremonial music, etc.), have the effect of bringing about a social rupture which, by tearing works out of their original context, strips them of their diverse religious or political functions and thus reduces them, by a sort of active *époque*, to their properly artistic function. The museum, as it isolates and separates (*frames apart*), is undoubtedly the site *par excellence* of that act of *constitution*, continually repeated with the untiring constancy of things, through which both the status of the sacred conferred on works of art and the sacralizing disposition they call for are affirmed and continually reproduced.¹⁰ The experience of the pictorial work as it has been asserted by this site in its exclusive devotion to pure contemplation tends to become the norm for the experience of all objects belonging to the very category which has been constituted by the fact of their being exhibited.

Everything inclines us to think that the history of aesthetic theory and of the philosophy of art is closely linked (without being its direct reflection, since it, too, develops in a field) to the history of the institutions suited to fostering access to pure delectation and disinterested contemplation, such as museums or those practical manuals of visual gymnastics called tourist guides or writings on art (among which must be included innumerable travel writings). In fact, it is clear that the theoretical writings which the history of traditional philosophy treats as contributions to the knowledge of the object are also (and more especially) contributions to the *social construction of the very reality* of this object, and hence of the theoretical and practical conditions of its existence (the same thing may be said about treatises on political theory by Machiavelli, Bodin or Montesquieu).

It would be necessary to rewrite the history of pure aesthetics *from this perspective*, showing, for example, how professional philosophers have imported into the domain of art certain concepts originally developed in the *theological* tradition, especially a conception of the artist as a 'creator' endowed with an almost divine faculty called 'imagination' and capable of producing a 'second nature', a 'second world', *sui generis* and autonomous; how Alexandre Baumgarten, in his *Philosophical Reflections on Poetry* of 1735, transposed into the aesthetic order a Leibnizian cosmogony according to which God, in the creation of the best of all possible worlds, chose ours among an infinity of worlds, all formed of compossible elements and governed by specific internal laws, making of the poet a creator and of the poem a world subject to its own laws, whose truth does not reside in its correspondence with the real, but in its internal coher-

ence; how Karl Philipp Moritz tried to prove that the work of art is a microcosm whose beauty 'has no need of being useful' because it has 'within itself the purpose of its existence'; how, following another theoretical line (which must also be considered in its social dimension, by situating each thinker in his field), the idea that supreme good consists of the contemplation of the Beautiful (with its different theoretical foundations, Platonic and Plotinian, but also Leibnizian) was developed by different writers, and in particular Shaftesbury, Karl Philipp Moritz and Kant (who adopts the viewpoint of the receiver rather than the producer of the work of art, meaning the stance of contemplation), and then Schiller, Schlegel, Schopenhauer and many others; and how this predominantly German philosophical tradition was connected through the intermediary of Victor Cousin with French writers of art for art's sake, especially Baudelaire or Flaubert, who reinvented in their own fashion the theory of the 'creator', of the 'other world' and of pure contemplation.¹¹

It would be necessary also to reveal in each case, as I have tried to do with respect to Kant, the indices of a social relation which is always implicated in the relationship to the work of art (for example in pairs of adjectives such as pure and impure, intelligible and sensory, refined and vulgar, etc.), and to put this hidden but fundamental relationship in turn into relation with the position and trajectory of the author in the field (philosophical, artistic, etc.) and in social space. This genealogy, which would probably rather irksomely record returns and repetitions which are linked, often in an indiscernible manner, to conscious or unconscious borrowings or to reinventions, would constitute the surest and most radical exploration of that unconscious which all cultivated people, because they have it in common, are ready to uphold as a universal (*a priori*) form of knowledge.

Historical categories of artistic perception

Thus the more established the field becomes, the less can the production of the work of art, of its value but also of its meaning, be reduced to the sole labour of an artist – who, paradoxically, increasingly becomes the focus of attention. Production of the work brings into play all the producers of works classified as artistic, whether great or small, famous (celebrated) or unknown, as well as critics, themselves constituted as a field, not to mention collectors, middlemen, curators – in short, all those who have ties to art and who, living for art and living off art, confront each other in the

competitive struggle over the definition of the meaning and value of the work of art, and hence the delimitation of the world of art and (true) artists, and who collaborate through these very struggles in the production of the value of art and the artist.

If the science of works of art is still today in its infancy, it is probably because those in charge of it, and in particular art historians and theoreticians of the aesthetic, are engaged unwittingly (or without in any case drawing out all the consequences) in the struggles which yield the meaning and value of the work of art: in other words, they are caught up in the object they would take as their object. To be convinced of this it is enough to observe that the concepts used to think about works of art, and in particular to judge and classify them, are characterized, as Wittgenstein has noted, by the most extreme indeterminacy, and this is so whether one looks at genres (poetry, tragedy, comedy, drama or novel), forms (ballad, rondeau, sonnet or sonata, alexandrine or free verse), periods or styles (Gothic, baroque, classical), or movements (Impressionists, Symbolists, realists, naturalists). And the confusion is just as present in concepts used to characterize the work of art itself, to perceive it and appreciate it, such as the adjectival pairs which structure artistic experience.

Because they are inscribed in common language and are applied for the most part beyond the properly aesthetic sphere, these categories of judgement of taste are shared by all speakers of the same language and so permit an apparent form of communication. Nevertheless they always remain marked, even in the use made of them by professionals, by an extreme vagueness and flexibility which, as Wittgenstein again has observed, makes them completely resistant to essentialist definition.¹² This is probably because the use made of these terms and the meaning given to them depend on the particular points of view, situated socially and historically, of their users – points of view which are quite often completely irreconcilable.

The analyst conscious of the fact that his or her analysis of the game is always threatened with being itself caught up in the game can expect almost insurmountable difficulties in presenting findings. In particular, this is because the most methodically controlled language is certain to appear, once a naive reading brings it back into the social game, as the taking of a position in the very debate it is trying to objectify. Thus, for example, just when one has substituted a more neutral term, like 'periphery', for a more indigenous word such as 'province' which is overly charged with pejorative connotations, it remains the case that the opposition between centre and periphery which one might resort to in order to analyse certain effects of symbolic domination exercised in the literary or artistic world, at the national or international level, is itself a stake in the struggles of the field under analysis, and that each of the terms used to name it

may have, according to the receiver's point of view, diametrically opposite connotations. So, for example, we have the desire of the 'central' ones, meaning the dominants, to describe the position-takings of those on the 'peripheries' as an effect of lag or of 'provincialism', and on the other hand the resistance of those on the 'peripheries' to the loss of standing implicit in this classification, and their efforts to convert a peripheral position into a central position or at least into a chosen distance.

In short, although one can always argue about taste (and, as everyone knows, the confrontation over preferences plays an important part in daily conversations), it is certainly true that communication in these matters takes place only with a very high degree of misunderstanding: in effect, the classificatory schemes which render it possible also help to render it practically ineffective. Thus it is possible for individuals occupying different positions in social space to give completely different meanings and values – and often opposed ones – to the adjectives commonly used to characterize works of art or mundane objects.¹³ And one would never finish a survey of the notions, starting with the idea of beauty, which in different periods have taken on different, even radically opposite, meanings, notably in the wake of artistic revolutions. One example is the notion of 'finish' which, after having condensed the inseparably ethical and aesthetic ideal of academic painting, found itself banished from art by Manet and the Impressionists.

Thus the categories engaged in the perception and appreciation of the work of art are doubly linked to historical context: associated with a social universe which is situated and dated, they are also the object of usages which are themselves socially marked by the social position of their users. The majority of notions which artists and critics employ to define themselves or to define their adversaries are weapons and stakes in struggles, and a number of the categories which art historians deploy in order to treat their topic are nothing more than classificatory schemes issuing from these struggles and then more or less skilfully disguised or transfigured. Initially conceived, most often, as insults or condemnations (our term 'category' stems from the Greek *katègorein*, meaning to accuse publicly), these combative concepts gradually become the technical categories on to which, thanks to genesis amnesia, critical dissections and academic theses or dissertations confer an air of eternity.

If there is a truth, it is that truth is a stake in the struggle; and, even though the divergent or antagonist classifications or judgements made by agents engaged in the artistic field are indisputably determined or oriented by specific dispositions and interests linked to positions in the field and to points of view, they are nevertheless

formulated in the name of a pretension to universality, to absolute judgement, which is the very negation of the relativity of points of view.¹⁴ 'Essentialist thought' is at work in all social universes and most especially in fields of cultural production – the religious field, the scientific field, the literary field, the artistic field, the legal field, etc. – where games which have the universal at stake are played out. But it is quite clear in that case that 'essences' are norms. This is what Austin was recalling when he analysed the implications of the adjective 'real' [*vrai*] in expressions such as 'real' man, 'real' courage, or in the case here, 'real' artist or 'real' masterpiece: in all these examples, the word 'real' implicitly contrasts the case under consideration with all cases in the same class which have also been given this predicate by other speakers (although in a manner which is not 'really' justified), this predicate being symbolically very powerful, like any claim to the universal.

The only thing science can do is to try to establish the truth of these struggles over truth and to grasp the objective logic behind the way the stakes and camps, the strategies and victories, are determined; to relate representations and instruments of thought, which feel as if they are unconditioned, back to the social conditions of their production and use, that is, to the historical structure of the field where they are generated and where they operate. By following the methodological postulate, constantly supported by empirical analysis, of the homology between the space of position-takings (literary or artistic forms, concepts and instruments of analysis, etc.) and the space of positions occupied in the field, one is led to historicize those cultural products which all share a pretension to universality. But historicizing them is not only (as some think) to relativize them, recalling that they have meaning only with reference to a determined state of the field of struggles; it also means giving them back their necessity by tearing them out of the indeterminacy which stems from a false eternalization and relating them back to the social conditions of their genesis – a truly generative definition.

This holds true, too, for 'reception'. Contrary to the common representation which maintains that sociological analysis, by relating each form of taste to its social conditions of production, reduces and relativizes the practices and representations concerned, one can see it as tearing them out of the arbitrary and making them absolute, by making them both necessary and incomparable, hence justified in existing as they do. One may, in effect, suggest that two persons possessing each a different *habitus*, not being exposed to the same situation and to the same stimulations, do not hear the same music and do not see the same paintings since they construe them

differently, and so they are bound to bring forth different value judgements.

The oppositions structuring aesthetic perception are not given a priori, but are historically produced and reproduced; they are indissociable from the historical conditions of their being put into operation. By the same token, the aesthetic disposition, which constitutes as works of art the objects socially designated for its application (at the same stroke extending its activity to aesthetic expertise, with its categories, concepts, taxonomies), is a product of the whole history of the field which must be reproduced, in each potential consumer of the work of art, by a specific apprenticeship. It is sufficient to observe the distribution of the aesthetic disposition in history (one thinks, for example, of those critics who until the end of the nineteenth century defended an art subordinated to moral values and didactic functions), or else observe the aesthetic disposition at the core of a society today, in order to be convinced that nothing is less natural than the ability to adopt towards a work of art (and even more so towards any ordinary object) the aesthetic posture such as essentialist analysis describes it.

The invention of the pure gaze is brought about in the very movement of the field towards autonomy. In effect, as we have seen, the assertion of the autonomy of the principles of production and evaluation of the work of art is inseparable from the assertion of the autonomy of the producer, that is, of the field of production. The pure gaze – like pure painting to which it necessarily corresponds and which is made to be beheld in itself and for itself, as painting, as a play with form, values and colours, meaning independently of any reference to transcendent meanings – is the result of a process of purification. It is the product of a veritable essentialist analysis carried out by history in the course of successive revolutions which, as in the religious field, always lead the new avant-garde to challenge orthodoxy, in the name of a return to the rigour of beginnings and a purer definition of genre.

In more general terms, the evolution of different fields of cultural production towards a greater autonomy is accompanied, as we have seen, by a sort of reflexive and critical turning back by producers upon their own production, which leads them to distinguish its own principle and its specific assumptions. In so far as it manifests a rupture with external demands and a desire to exclude artists suspected of obeying them, the affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of mode of representation over the object of representation, is the most specific expression of the claim to the autonomy of the field and of its pretension to produce and to impose the

principles of a specific legitimacy as much in the order of production as in the order of reception of the work of art. To make the manner of saying it triumph over the thing said, to sacrifice the 'subject', heretofore directly subject to demand, to the manner of treating it, to the pure play of colours, values and forms, to constrain the language in order to constrain the attention paid to language – all this finally comes down to affirming the specificity and unstitutability of the product and the producer by putting the stress on the most specific and most irreplaceable aspect of the act of production. The artist challenges any external constraint or demand and affirms his or her mastery over what defines him or her and what belongs to him or her by right, that is, the manner, form, style – *art* in short, thus established as the exclusive purpose of art. One must quote Delacroix: 'All subjects become good through the worthiness of the author. Oh, young artist, do you seek a subject? Everything is a subject, the subject is you yourself, your impressions, your emotions before nature. You must look within yourself, not around you.'¹⁵ The true subject of the work of art is none other than the properly artistic manner of apprehending the world, that is, the artists themselves, their manners and styles, those infallible marks of the mastery to which they owe their art. Baudelaire and Flaubert in the domain of writing, and Manet in the domain of painting, pushed to its ultimate consequences, at the cost of extraordinary subjective and objective difficulties, the conscious affirmation of the all-powerfulness of the artistic gaze. By showing an ability to apply it not only to base and vulgar objects as was the aim of the realism of Champfleury and Courbet, but also to insignificant objects, the 'creator' can assert an almost divine power of transmutation and can posit the autonomy of form over the subject, at the same time assigning to cultivated perception its fundamental norm.

The second reason for the reflexive and critical return of art upon itself is the fact that the closing of the field of production creates the conditions for a circularity and an almost perfect reversibility of the relations of production and consumption. In becoming the principal object of the position-takings and contentions among producers, stylistic principles are embodied in a more and more rigorous and accomplished manner in works of art at the same time as they are asserted, always more explicitly and systematically, in the confrontation between the producer and the critical judgements brought to bear on the work, or in confronting the works of other producers and in the theoretical discourse produced by and for that encounter. In addition, the practical mastery of the specific achievements inscribed in past and recorded works, codified and canonized by a

whole corpus of professionals of conservation and celebration – historians of art and literature, exegetes, analysts, critics – is part of the conditions of entry into the field of production. From this it follows, contrary to what a naive relativism teaches, that 'time' in the history of art is really irreversible, and that it presents a form of *cumulativity*. Absolutely nothing is more connected to the proper tradition of the field, including the intention to subvert it, than avant-garde artists who, at the risk of appearing as naifs, must inevitably situate themselves in relation to all previous efforts at overtaking which have occurred in the history of the field and in the space of possibles which it imposes on new entrants.

What survives in the field is more and more linked to the specific history of the field, and to it alone, and hence is more and more difficult to deduce from the state of the social world at any given moment (as a certain 'sociology' which ignores the specific logic of the field claims to do). Adequate perception of works which – like Warhol's Brillo boxes or Klein's monochrome paintings – obviously owe their existence, their value and their formal properties to the structure of the field, and so to its history, can only be differential and diacritical, meaning attentive to the deviations with respect to other works, contemporary but also past. As with production, the consumption of works which have come out of a long tradition of ruptures with tradition tends to become historical through and through, and yet more and more totally dehistoricized: in effect, the history brought into play by decoding and appreciation is increasingly reduced to the pure history of forms, completely eclipsing the social history of struggles over forms which is the life and the movement of the artistic field.

This counters the challenge made by formalist aesthetics, only interested in the form (in reception as much as in production), to sociological analysis. In effect, works that stem from purely formal research seem made to consecrate the exclusive validity of internal reading, a reading which is attentive solely to the properties of form, and to frustrate or discredit all attempts to reduce these works to a social context against which they were constituted.¹⁶ However, in order to reverse the situation, it suffices to observe that the formalist ambition's objection to any kind of historicization rests on a lack of awareness of its own social conditions of possibility, as does the aesthetic philosophy, moreover, which records and ratifies this ambition . . . What is forgotten in both cases is the historical process in the course of which the social conditions of freedom from external determinations emerge, that is, the relatively autonomous field of production and the pure aesthetic it makes possible.

The conditions of pure reading

Like the 'pure' perception of pictorial or musical works, the 'pure' reading that the most advanced works of the avant-garde imperatively require and that critics and other professional readers tend to apply to any legitimate work is a *social institution* which is the end result of a whole history of the field of cultural production, a history of the production of the pure writer – and the pure consumer whom the field helps to produce by producing for that person. Being the product of social conditions of a particular type, the text postulates the existence of a reader capable of adopting the posture corresponding to these conditions: since it is the expression of a field which has achieved a high degree of autonomy, it contains within itself an injunction, a summons – actually the one recorded and ratified, without knowing it, by most theories of reception and of reading. In effect, by grounding themselves in an apparently phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of a cultivated reader, these theories are compelled to extract, from this embodied norm, naively normative theses.

What is baptized as the 'implicit' reader by reception theory (and Wolfgang Iser), the 'archilecteur' by Michael Riffaterre,¹⁷ or the 'informed reader' by Stanley Fish¹⁸ – the reader of whom analysis really speaks (for example, in the description of the experience of reading as retention and protension with Wolfgang Iser¹⁹) – is none other than the theoretician himself, who, by following a very common inclination among *lectores*, takes as object his own experience (not analysed sociologically) as a cultivated reader. He does not need to push empirical observation very far to discover that the reader called for by pure works is the product of exceptional social conditions which reproduce (*mutatis mutandis*) the social conditions of their production (in this sense, the author and legitimate reader are interchangeable).²⁰

This once again means that the break with intuitionism and the narcissistic complacency of the hermeneutic tradition can only be achieved in and through a reappropriation of the whole history of the field of production which has produced the producers, the consumers and the products, and hence produced the analysts themselves – that is, in and through a historical and sociological labour which constitutes the only effective form of knowledge of self. It is in this sense, diametrically opposed to that offered by the 'hermeneutic' tradition, that one may assert that 'in the end, all understanding is an understanding of oneself.'²¹

To understand is to grasp a necessity, a *raison d'être*, by recon-

structing, in the particular case of a particular author, a generative formula whose knowledge allows one to reproduce in another mode the very production of the work, to feel necessity accomplish itself, even outside any empathic experience. The gap between necessitating reconstruction and participating comprehension is never as manifest as when interpreters are led by their labour to experience as necessary the practices of agents who occupy certain positions in the intellectual field or in social space which are totally alien to their own, and hence likely to appear to them profoundly 'antipathetic'.²² The labour needed to reconstruct the generative formula at the source of a work has nothing to do with that sort of direct and immediate identification between the unique ego of the reader and the unique ego of the creator evoked in the romantic vision of the 'living reading', understood (especially by Herder) as a sort of divining intuition of the author's soul. Moreover, the practice of reading as it can be observed with Georges Poulet himself (I am thinking of his analysis of a page of *Madame Bovary*) has no connection with what he says about it in his *Phenomenology of Reading*, that is, with an effort to put oneself in the place of the author, in order to re-live in some way an immanent experience of the work, and to arrive at that state of empathic fusion in which the reader's 'consciousness' 'acts as if it were the consciousness' of the author.

If the romantic representation of reading remains so strong within the scholarly tradition, both literary and philosophical, it is because it undoubtedly offers the best justification for the propensity of the *lector* to identify with the *auctor* and thus to participate, by procuration, in the 'creation' – an identification which certain inspired exegetes have grounded in theory, by defining interpretation as a 'creative' activity.²³ In the manner of Bachelard, who spoke of 'cosmic narcissism' with respect to an aesthetic experience of nature founded on the relationship 'I am beautiful because nature is beautiful and nature is beautiful because I am beautiful',²⁴ one could call *hermeneutic narcissism* that form of encounter with works and authors in which the hermeneutic scholar affirms his intelligence and grandeur by his empathic insight into great authors. The social history of interpretations which ought to accompany (or precede) any new interpretation would never come to the end of an inventory of the errors committed by many interpreters for the sole reason that they felt themselves authorized to see 'their' authors in their own image, thus lending them thoughts and feelings which are in fact rigorously situated and dated. We can all remember the pedantic and ridiculous annotations of school classics; but a number of sophisticated readings with no other foundation than projective identification and a more or less conscious transference are only better received because the ethical dispositions expressed in them are less rebarbative. In short, one cannot re-live or help someone else re-live the lived experience of others, and it is not sympathy which leads to true understanding, but true understanding which leads to sympathy, or better, to that sort of *amor intellectualis* which, based on the renunciation of narcissism, accompanies the discovery of necessity.²⁵

Only a sociological critique of pure reading, conceived as an analysis of the social conditions of possibility of this singular activity, can allow us to break with the assumptions that it tacitly engages, and perhaps also to escape the constraints and limitations which ignorance of these conditions and assumptions makes acceptable in the activity of pure reading.²⁶ Paradoxically, formalist criticism, which sees itself as free of any reference to institutions, tacitly accepts all the 'theses' inscribed in the existence of the institution from which it derives its authority. It tends to exclude any real questioning of the institution of reading, that is, any challenge to the delimitation of the corpus of texts consecrated by the institution as much as to a definition of the legitimate mode of reading which apprehends (according to more or less codified interpretative frameworks) texts constituted as self-sufficient realities, concealing within themselves their reason for being.

One cannot get out of the enchanted circle of *legenda* producing the *modus legendi* which reproduces them as objects worthy of being read, and read as timeless objects of a purely aesthetic delectation, without taking that circle as object within two sorts of inquiry: on the one hand, a history of the progressive invention of pure reading, a mode of apprehending works which is partly linked with the autonomization of the field of literary production and the corresponding appearance of works demanding to be read (or reread) in themselves and for themselves; on the other hand, a history of the process of canonization which has led to the constitution of a corpus of canonic works whose value the education system tends continually to reproduce by producing aware consumers (which means converted ones) as well as sacralizing commentaries. The analysis of critical discourse on works is in effect both a critical preliminary to a science of works and a contribution to a science of the production of works as objects of belief.

Without even contemplating sketching out this programme here (it is, moreover, partly achieved in the work of historians),²⁷ I just want to stress the affinity between the position of *lector* and the dehistoricized and dehistoricizing reading of a corpus of canonic works which are themselves dehistoricized. We know that until the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea (which did not need to be explained because it was so self-evident) of a time-immemorial 'humanity' underlies the selection of what one calls the 'humanities':²⁸ this 'culture' is made up essentially from the great texts of Greek and Roman antiquity which, through the commentaries and grammatical and rhetorical exercises focused on them, were thought to furnish the entire sum of eternal topics indispensable to thought about the fundamental problems of politics, morality and metaphysics.²⁹ As Durkheim observed, 'everything should maintain youth in that conviction that man is always and everywhere similar to himself; that the only changes which he

presents in history are reduced to exterior and superficial modifications [...]. Therefore one could not, upon leaving school, conceive of human nature other than as a sort of eternal reality, immutable and invariable, independent of time and space, since the diversity of places and conditions do not affect it.³⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, ancient languages and literatures continued to dominate curricula and, despite the effort of a minority current which wanted, in the Encyclopedic spirit, to train observation and experimentation, pedagogy remained oriented towards the acquisition of rhetoric (through Latin or French discourse) and moral education or, more precisely, the 'elevation of thought'.³¹ The combination of a universalistic humanism and a formalist reading of texts reaches its apogee under the Third Republic, in the secularized spiritualism of the university cult of the text treated as pure form (with the scholastic genre of 'explication de textes') and suitable for admission into the pantheon of canonic authors, there to serve as the basis for a sort of republican and national consensus, founded on the neutralization through derealization and eclecticism of any conflict which might divide the different sections of the dominants (faith and reason, conservatism and progressivism, etc.). As Lionel Gossman notes, we observe that after 1870, in England and the United States as well as in France, the teaching of literature, which had been geared to the apprenticeship of writing and public speaking (with, in Anglo-Saxon countries, an accent on what is called *elocution*), becomes more and more an 'activity of appreciation', 'suitable to cultivate the sentiments and imagination', with the teaching of rhetoric increasingly giving way to a culture of taste and a preparation for reception.³²

There is a link of mutual dependence between the nature of the texts offered for reading and the form of the reading done of them. The reading of the *lector* assumes a *skholè*, a socially instituted situation of *studious leisure* in which one may 'seriously play' (*spoudaiôs paizein*) and take playful things seriously; and hence the reading is disposed to grant very exactly what playful things demand from the dehistoricized work of university tradition, as well as from the literary work born of the formalist intention.

Pure production produces and presupposes pure reading, and *ready-mades* are just a sort of limit case of all works produced for commentary and by commentary. To the extent that the field gains in autonomy, writers feel themselves increasingly authorized to write works destined to be *decoded*, hence subject to a *repeated reading necessary to explore, without exhausting it, the intrinsic polysemy* of the work. For his part, the 'pure' reader who excludes any reductive reference to the social history of production and producers and any historian's intention to reactivate the polemical and political virtue of the literary work naturally espouses the 'intention' (as Panofsky said) of all works which have no other intention than not to have an intention, except that inscribed in the very form of the work. It follows that the *scholastic view* of which Austin spoke³³ is never so *invisible* as when *scholars* of all countries, shut within the perfect circle unknowingly outlined by their aesthetic theories, plunge (like

Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*) the pure gaze of a dehistoricizing reading into the mirror of a pure and perfectly dehistoricized work.

Poverty of ahistoricism

It is undoubtedly no accident that the scholastic vision of the world and the set of indisputable (because instituted) premises which it tacitly engages are never as openly betrayed as in the case of philosophy: paradoxically, insertion into a universe placed under the dominion of the *skholè*, of gratuitous study, of finality without purpose, does not necessarily predispose one to objectify all the conditions of possibility of the aesthetic experience, which Kant well characterized as 'the pure exercise of the faculty of feeling' or as a 'disinterested play of the sensibilities'. More precisely, the philosophy of the history of philosophy which professors of philosophy of all theoretical persuasions³⁴ involve *in practice* in the reading of philosophical texts, and for which Gadamer produces the explicit theory, in no way inclines them to tear themselves away, in their theories of the perception of cultural works (of which theories of reading are a particular case), from the enchanted circle of pure reading of texts purified of any historical attachment.

It would be necessary to bring to light the ensemble of assumptions constitutive of the *philosophical doxa*, a paradoxical reality, rigorously shielded from the most 'radical' challenges posed by the accredited critics of the *doxa*; and in particular all the assumptions involved *in practice* in the 'philosophical' reading of texts that the scholastic tradition designates as 'philosophical', meaning those that call for this reading. In this way one would see that the dehistoricized and dehistoricizing reading by the historian of philosophy tends to bracket out (more or less completely) anything that ties the text to a history and a society and, in particular, to the space of possibles in relation to which philosophical work was originally defined; and also that it ignores the *ensemble* of coexisting systems, which – at least so long as the philosophical field is not yet constituted as such (and undoubtedly even beyond that, as we see clearly, for example, in the case of Heidegger) – cannot all be 'philosophical' in the strict sense the internal definition implies.

We forget that what circulates among philosophers, whether contemporaries or of successive eras, is not only canonic texts, but also titles of books, labels of schools, garbled quotations, and concepts ending in -ism – often entailing polemical denunciations or devastating anathemas (which sometimes function as slogans). There are also the routine wisdoms which are transmitted through

courses and textbooks, the invisible and unadmitted props of the 'common sense' of an intellectual generation, and which tend to reduce certain works to a few keywords, a few obligatory quotations. And there is also the immense quantity of information which is linked to belonging to a field and which is immediately invested in exchanges among contemporaries: information on institutions (academies, journals, publishers, etc.) and people, on their physical appearance and their institutional affiliation, on their interrelations, alliances or quarrels, and everything which links them to their times; information on problems and ideas which are current in the ordinary universe, and which are carried by newspapers – has a historian of philosophy, even a Hegelian, ever inspected the philosopher's morning paper? – on the debates and conflicts of the university world which, universalized, are so often at the source of the university vision of the universe.

Reading, and a fortiori the reading of books, and books of philosophy, is but one of the many ways, even for the most bookish of professional readers, to acquire the learning mobilized in writing and reading. And so the greatest part of the immense invisible plinth of great thought, and notably everything taken for granted by contemporaries, risks remaining inaccessible: passing unnoticed, this *doxa* has little chance of being recorded by witnesses' testimony, in chronicles or memoirs – which, whatever their author's actual proneness to amnesia, are always the 'memoirs of an amnesiac', in Satie's phrase. By transporting on to a properly epistemic terrain – if only by the abolition of reference to the realities designated by proper names or by so-called personal allusions – thoughts, judgements and analyses which are partly the product of the universalization of the particular case, ordinary reading transforms into timeless and impersonal answers to timeless and universal problems those position-takings which (on the terrain of politics or morality, but also, even if to a lesser extent, in the order of knowledge or of logic) remain rooted in questions, learning and experiences constituted and acquired according to the mode of doxic knowledge.

The more or less conscious dehistoricization determined by the active or passive ignorance of the historical context is associated with the actualization – always more or less anachronistic – unconsciously performed by any reading, unless a special effort is made, by the sole fact of relating texts to the current space of possibles and to the philosophical problematic inscribed in this space. This 'actualizing' reference is what allows a commentary to be produced, by anachronism, which is both dated and falsely achronic, and which, even when it believes itself faithful to the spirit and letter of thoughts it wants simply to reproduce, actually transforms them, because the space in which it makes them function has been transformed.

It is this common practice of philosophical commentary which is justified and codified by the hermeneutic theory proposed by Gadamer,

an application of the Heideggerian philosophy of philosophy to the reading of philosophical texts. According to *Truth and Method*, an adequate comprehension of a philosophical text is an 'application' (one could just as well say an *execution*, as for a musical work or an order), in short, a putting into practice of a programme of action inscribed in the work itself. It is postulated that this programme is endowed with a transhistorical validity and that its implementation is none other than an *actualization*, which, grounded in the essential temporality of the existing, makes it present, historic in the very act of making it acting and efficient. And a radical contrast is made between understanding a philosophical (or legal) text *historically* and understanding something *philosophically* or legally, meaning putting into practice the programme immanent in the text, executing the score and the order which it contains. 'The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, i.e. place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves.'³⁵ In short, where historical understanding historicizes and relativizes, 'authentic' understanding apprehends a truth torn out of time in and through the detemporalizing act of comprehension.

Effectively it is messages such as philosophical or theological or legal texts, and especially scientific propositions (strangely absent from the 'tradition' as Gadamer defines it), which – even though they are the product of history – 'to speak like Kant, seem to pretend to universal validity', among other reasons because they receive a form of practical eternity from a historical actualization which is continually recommenced. And it is true that the historical apprehension that analyses the conditions of the *emergence* of these normative messages claiming to impose the conditions of their adequate actualization is, in practice, completely different from, if not excluded by, an actualization performed by someone who 'applies' a physical law or who performs a calculation of probabilities – and who could not care less about the historical processes leading to its 'emergence'. But is the same true of a philosophical theory, a juridical law or a theological dogma, and should independence from historical conditions not be, in that case, put to the test, at the risk of identifying truth with *authority* (as the use of the very word 'tradition' suggests)? Must we accept all the political implications of the overthrow of the Kantian hierarchy of the faculties proposed by Gadamer when he suggests 'redefining the hermeneutics of the human sciences in terms of legal or theological hermeneutics'?³⁶

It is just such an overthrow that he performs, out of evident concern for conservatism (as much political as intellectual), when, on the basis of a 'rehabilitation of authority and tradition'³⁷ and a denunciation of the prejudice of refusing prejudice, he means to treat philosophical texts, in the manner of theological or legal texts, as bearers of a 'normative value'. For the philosopher-philologist whom Heidegger put on a pedestal, adequate interpretation is a revelation of truth which consists of saying the truth about a text of truth.

But how is it possible not to see that all the various stakes and interests which may be involved there may mean that the logical rationales which give philosophical or legal or theological constructions the appearance of a universal normativity may only be rationalizations designed to universalize particular interests? How can we not fear that the subjective experience of normativity is only an illusion born of the affinity between habitus and interests (itself grounded in an identity of conditions or, at the very least, a homology of positions) between those who have produced the original message and those who give themselves the mission of 'applying' it? And, at the risk of succumbing to *superstition*, should we not submit and subordinate any application of resources inherited from the past to a historical criticism of their causes and effects, of their conditions of production and conditions of reception?

Double historicization

At the risk of introducing surreptitiously, thanks to the effusion and illusion of immediate understanding, the most obscure layers of beliefs that are always concealed in the cultural arbitrary of a tradition, one must in effect operate a *double historicization*, both of tradition and of the 'application' of tradition. Only the analysis of inherited schemas of thought and of the illusory manifestations they produce can ensure a theoretical mastery (itself a condition of a true practical mastery) of the process of communication. This requires the reconstruction both of the space of possible positions (apprehended through the dispositions associated with a certain position) in relation to which the historical given (text, document, image, etc.) to be interpreted is elaborated, and of the space of possibles in relation to which one interprets it. To ignore this double determination is to be condemned to an anachronistic and ethnocentric 'understanding' which is likely to be fictive and which, in the best of cases, remains unaware of its own principles (the appearance of normative evidence and timeless necessity it procures may be the effect of the homology

between the two historical situations, or the result of a labour of unwitting reinterpretation based on the excessive application of the interpreter's categories of thought). This alienated 'understanding', ignorant of its own social conditions of possibility, defines the traditional relationship to tradition, a relationship of immersion and adherence without any distance; the appearance of historical awareness, as a consciousness of the gap between the time of production and the time of 'application', marks the rupture with that 'understanding'. And the traditionalist relationship, which is to the traditional relationship what orthodoxy is to the *doxa*, and of which Heidegger and Gadamer made themselves the theoreticians, aims to mimic this naive relation by a fictive return to the prehistoric experience of tradition.

To understand understanding is to understand why such a tradition associated with a social universe rather distant in time and space – the aesthetic of Kant or, perhaps to a lesser degree, his theory of the 'conflict of faculties' – speaks to us spontaneously in the language of the universal: the 'fusion of horizons' may be purely illusory and rest on nothing but the confusion of horizons which defines anachronism and ethnocentrism, and it remains, in any case, to be explained. The subjective impression of necessity which we experience from a statement which appears to be an answer capable of convincing whomever asks the question at issue must be tested by reconstructing the social genesis of the question, thus its reason for being and its meaning, and the social conditions of its perpetuation as a question, and hence the social genesis of the questioning and the questioner. In short, it is not sufficient to sense transhistoricity in the naiveté of an immediate identification with the text (or the event) – a transhistoricity must be proved. To escape (however slightly) from history, understanding must know itself as historical and give itself the means to understand itself historically; and it must, in the same movement, understand historically the historical situation in which what it labours to understand was formed.

Though one may be convinced that being is history, with no afterlife, and that one must therefore demand of biological history (with the theory of evolution) and sociological history (with the analysis of the collective and individual sociogenesis of forms of thought) the truth of a reason which is historical through and through and yet irreducible to history, it must also be admitted that it is by historicization (and not by the decisive dehistoricization of a sort of theoretical *escapism*) that one may endeavour to extract reason most effectively from historicity. First there is historicization of the known object, of categories of thought and of perception (the 'quattrocento

eye', for example) which have been invested in its production, and which differ from those we spontaneously apply to it. Then there is historicization of knowing subjects, of their reading and perception, categories of thought, perception and appreciation, which intervene nowhere more than in the case of the comprehension and (apparently) immediate appreciation which we may (believe we) have, beyond the bounds of historical distance, of a painting by Piero della Francesca or a text by Empedocles or Parmenides, not to mention an African mask.

Unless one is satisfied with the verbal and tautological solutions of the ontology of the *Verstehen* for which Heidegger supplied the model, then it is from the labour of historical science, a collective and cumulative labour, and not from some form of transcendental reflection, that one must expect the solution to the question of the adequate appropriation of products of historical labour – documents, monuments, instruments – which are linked to a greater or lesser extent to determinations of the historical situation. Certain of them, especially instruments of thought (methods, concepts, etc.), orient and organize our present perception of the historical past (thus contributing to the apparent abolition of *distance* with respect to the past).³⁸ In fact, only a labour of this sort can give us access to an appropriate knowledge of the social conditions of the work's production, offering by the same token the means of explaining it, *giving it reason*, that is, restoring to it its specific rationale and necessity, in short, making its existence felt as necessary (which does not amount, as Gadamer thinks, to resuscitating its historical environment). Only work like this, too, can give us knowledge of, and thereby make us conscious of, the whole collection of assumptions engaged in the way the work is perceived, starting with the principles, intentionally drawn on or not, of hermeneutic technique and the presuppositions concerning the function conferred on 'reading' or on the perception of the work (either as a purely cognitive function of understanding in order to understand or as a purely normative function of the edifying 'application'). It is only at the end of this double test that an accurate understanding may be gained of the lasting *effect* the work exercises, whether it be the 'eternal charm' of Greek art that Marx described (rather casually . . .), or even the *effect of truth*, which may be accompanied or not by a real revelation of truth.

Only social history can effectively supply the means to rediscover the historical truth in the objectivized or incorporeal traces of history which present themselves to awareness in the guise of a universal essence. Reminding ourselves of the historical determinations of reasoning may constitute the principle of a true freedom with respect

to these determinations. Free thought must be won by a historical anamnesis capable of revealing everything in thought which is the forgotten product of historical work. Becoming resolutely aware of historical determinations, a true reconquest of the self (which is the exact opposite of the magical flight into 'essential thought') offers a possibility of really controlling these determinations. It is only by mobilizing all the resources of the social sciences that a historicist realization of the transcendental project can be carried to its conclusion. Like souls which, according to the myth of Er, have drunk the waters of Lethe after having chosen their lot of determinations, our thought has forgotten the ontogenesis and the phylogenesis of its own structures; since their roots are to be found in the structures of social fields established by history, they can be restored to our thought by knowledge of history and of the structure of these fields. The effort I have made here to try to advance this knowledge would be justified, to my mind, if I had succeeded in demonstrating (and convincingly) the possibility of a way of thinking about the social conditions of thought which gives thought an opportunity of freedom in relation to those conditions.

2

The Social Genesis of the Eye

I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present image.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

The book by Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*,¹ appeared to me at first as an exemplary realization of what a sociology of artistic perception ought to be, and also as an opportunity to get rid of the traces of intellectualism which might have remained in the exposition I had made some years earlier of the fundamental principles of a science of artistic perception.² Describing the comprehension of a work of art as an act of *decoding*, I suggested that the science of the work of art had the goal of reconstructing the artistic *code*, understood as a historically constituted system of classification (or of principles of division)³ which is crystallized in an ensemble of *words* permitting us to name and perceive differences;⁴ that is to say, more precisely, the goal of writing a history of these codes, instruments of perception which vary in time and space, notably as a function of transformations in the material and symbolic instruments of production.⁵ I based myself on a systematic analysis of the variations in the preferences of the visitors to European museums according to different social variables (such as level of education, age, place of residence, profession, etc.) in order to demonstrate that the categories of perception (naively held as universal and eternal) applied by art lovers in our societies to a work of art are in fact historical categories, and these need to be reconstructed