

Essays on English and American Literature

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Essays on English and American Literature

By

Olivier Abiteboul

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FOREWORD

When one reads the philosophers labelled as “pre-socratic” (who are not essentially in disagreement with that great Master who became, maybe arbitrarily, a pivotal point in the history of philosophy...), one presently becomes aware of a primordial fact: with those philosophers, known only thanks to various testimonies and odd fragments (the tip of the iceberg...), there was no divide between Art, Science, Religion and Philosophy. All of that was one, the distinctions and categorizations intended as neat, distinct, even systematic, appeared later, in an intricate movement of rationalistic division, separation and specialization which, all things considered, has its own limitations and may even lead to short-sightedness or even blindness, a fact revealed by the relatively recent, gradual, deliberate emergence, *in all fields*, of a multidisciplinary approach as a guarantee of truth and validity for any research.

Some astrophysicists now confirm certain truths which some Mystics revealed intuitively or discovered through meditation... In literature and criticism, anthropology (including religion and symbology), psychoanalysis and linguistics (including semiotics) give rise to insightful, stimulating encounters and collaborations.

Olivier Abiteboul’s essays offer a fine blend of literature, literary criticism, philosophy and, inconspicuously, linguistics. But they rise above all that thanks to his loving and earnest commitment.

The Myths of ancient societies were, in a way, the manifestation of man’s deep concern with all that was far above and beyond his understanding, all that dwarfed him and simultaneously challenged him (all that still dwarfs modern man but he is too eaten up with himself to know...).

In all Myths, the four paths of Art, Science, Religion and Philosophy met, blended and merged in varying ways—at the very least, they converged towards the same Unknown, the same Unknowable, the same summit of the pyramid meant to rise high and take the skies by storm...

In that respect, what is understood today by “literature” is merely, given its personal or personalized dominant feature, a degraded form of Myth as transmitter of values, principles, even doctrines, intended for individuals or groups, with a view to defining and constructing a sense

(direction and significance) of existence as nothing else but the gymnasium of inner work, a quest of light for an ascending journey through life.

Olivier Abiteboul's essays unfold a literary panorama ranging from the XVIth to the XXth century, where he has managed to choose authors of all genres and styles or, in other words, of very different manners of writing, but who have this common singularity: their art and aesthetics do not depart from philosophy and ethics.

This panorama, defined as a structural or structuralist analysis, is also a comparative study of very great interest.

The concept of structure in these essays gives rise, in a very simple way, to what I consider to be a revelation of the true nature of what meaning is all about in literature, i.e. "something" which *lives* through reception and the exchange between text and reader, far from the hidden thing of former times, the secret embalmed within the text, whose keys supposedly belonged to specialists...

Structuralism is a slightly high-sounding word which Olivier Abiteboul takes down from its academic pedestal (or showcase...) and wisely recycles in a simple way which stands to reason: first and foremost, it has to do here with *the principle of relation* between different parts of the text (two things, once related, create meaning); and, as already mentioned, between text and reader. Then, it implies something which we could lay down as an axiom: *all that is said stands for what is not said* (a principle common to allegory, irony and metaphor, which, as Olivier Abiteboul says, are the three main methods of literature at large).

Thus do we here approach maybe the subtlest aspect of the criticism known as structuralist: the aim is to see words, sentences, images, as the converging-points of underlying or "subterranean" signifying forces. There is a double movement or dynamics: one of correspondence between different passages of the text, therefore varying creation of varying meaning (*the principle of relation, relations create meaning*); and one of disclosure of a cluster of converging lines under each word, each sentence, each image, each section of the text. There is a double network of meaning: surface and depth. The field is unstable, uncertain, and, even if critics and simple readers can always agree on immutable elements of significance, it goes without saying that there will always be elusive, undecidable ones... Any literary text is always open, precisely (among other things) because of what I call the deep network, which oscillates between right intuition, contingent and maybe arbitrary subjectivity and the convincing or doubtful hypothesis...

Anyone loving literature knows this adventure which plays out half-way between *knowing a text and knowing oneself* (subjectivity can blind us to *the real text*): such is precisely the philosophical essence of all forms of literature. Knowledge of mankind is the very heart of all literatures, writers reveal the world and themselves to others and to themselves too, simultaneously offering, in the words of Marcel Proust, “*an optical instrument*” devised for self-knowledge, self-discovery and self-exploration—and even in cases of misinterpretation...

The critic is interested in knowing the text rather than himself, but that may still be a problem if he misreads the text without knowing that he does...

Mankind is obviously at the very centre of all arts, but all the more so in literary art where *the absolute hero is language itself*, an enormous paradox when one understands that no man is master of language and that language uses man much more than it is used by man...

Such is maybe the ultimate justification of criticism: it can show what writers do not always or necessarily see—provided the critic knows himself and stands at an adequate distance away from his own subjectivity... (that is maybe the best way of understanding the importance of modern methodologies, but subjectivity is still present and active there... and, apart from that, subjectivity as such is not necessarily negative or useless or prone to error, but that is another question...).

Do writers always know what they write, what they mean? And do they mean anything? Do they have intentions as clear and neat as claimed in some supposedly scientific criticism? Can anyone legitimately sustain the idea of an art resulting from, and giving voice to, a full or pure consciousness? (by the way, the same question applies to criticism, doesn't it?...).

I have always believed that the greatest Art springs more from unconscious than conscious forces...

The hidden face of what is known as “structuralism”, still in connection with the scientific connotation of the word (and the scientific pretensions of some critics...), is precisely what I am here attempting to underline, which Olivier Abiteboul gives to understand, or rather gives to hear, like a note or a chord which keeps resonating from one essay to the next throughout this collection: any method in itself (down to the very excesses of the rationalistic rigour or obscure jargon which are happily

absent from this collection) only reveals what, in all cases, is elusive, remains out of reach and will maybe reveal itself (partially...) after a new reading or with other readers (not necessarily critics or theorists...).

That is how I understand Olivier Abiteboul's choice of non-polemical criticism.

Eventually, concentrating, as does Olivier Abiteboul, on specific extracts (which have been very judiciously chosen) is a way of saying: real work can only be done on details, because it is in details that the variations and instabilities of meaning and interpretation are, sometimes unknown to readers..., determined.

Criticism is only an attempt, extremely difficult in itself, demanding as it does more sensitivity and delicacy than a background in theory, *to raise to the level of clear consciousness what takes place in the process of silent reading*. But, as soon as one embarks on textual analysis, one inevitably breaks up, or takes to pieces, what actually is, in terms of reception or perception, nothing but *the sheer continuity of a complete, undividable whole*. Criticism is not unlike the squaring of the circle...

It is impossible to show what takes place in the process of silent reading, where continuity alone exists, counts and works. Moreover, between the simple reading and the analytical work itself, much of the essence of the text may be lost (and actually is, presumably...).

Maybe the best way of going about critical work is showing the internal relations and being content with that, I mean even without going the whole length of interpretation: showing the relations is already interpretation...

Structuralism, like all "*sciences of literature*" (R. Barthes) raises a problem: particularly as far as literary art and the art of criticism are concerned, nothing can change the unstable, uncertain character of meaning (and nothing can prevent the illusion of understanding...). Ultimately, structuralism only sheds new light on the problem of meaning and the production of meaning and on the process of reception and interpretation. It provides the tools of a new consciousness, useful provided the critic, or the reader fond of analysis, can transform and adapt the concepts and methods to avoid applying them mechanically—which Olivier Abiteboul does very well, in a simple and unassuming way.

All modernist theories and methodologies must needs be taken with a grain of salt...—which Olivier Abiteboul does naturally, thanks to his

sincere and clear-sighted approach. His recognition of structuralism does not mean blind allegiance to it: his practice of criticism is motivated by his sole love of certain texts and remains spontaneous, honest, humble and free from highbrow intricacies and obscurities.

It is because literature, like any other art, boils down to a search of ethical and aesthetical essence (liable to be interfered with by the quest for style and the excessive concern with forms...) that criticism needs philosophy to clear a path through the dense, obscure forest of symbols and, if possible, as is done here by Olivier Abiteboul, to discover or open up clearings—so many invitations to read or re-read...

The value of literature (when it is literature worthy of the name...) is more often than not in a consciousness of vital values unfortunately absent from human life. It is also in the vast stormy space which it opens out between itself and the world, between us and the world—*this world made by men but not for men*...

It is in that respect that literature is essentially philosophical: knowledge of mankind, self-knowledge, quest for values worthy of us, spiritual principles able to found, structure and guide any life, able to nurture any soul and to awaken or re-awaken any consciousness.

Literature in the truest sense ought to be, following the example of the authors and texts presented and commented on by Olivier Abiteboul, an earnest and passionate (maybe unconscious) revival of the spirit of Myth.

These essays constitute an open system—so many loopholes with wide-angle views onto deep and broad perspectives.

René Agostini

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Many thanks are also due to René Agostini, Honorary Professor at the University of Avignon, whose help has been so precious to me, and whose foreword makes it clear that the question of the force of literature is of some theoretical interest...

INTRODUCTION

We would like to bring together in this volume a group of essays contributing to the history of English and American literature, and offering a fast survey dealing with the question of literary understanding. We will try to approach this question in a specific and almost systematic way, namely that of structuralist literary criticism. These essays were written for specific occasions, but the topics were chosen because of a personal interest: our interest in literary criticism is of course subordinate to our interest in primary literary texts. Our aim is to propose a preliminary to the understanding of literature in general, a sort of “philosophy of literature” (as we had already tried to do in our French volume *Petite philosophie de la littérature. Cinq essais de critique littéraire*, Scotts Valley, CA, CreateSpace, 2012). The reason is that the problems involved in critical reading of course reflect the powerful characteristics of literary language. Literature is highly reflexive: this is what we would like to show in these essays.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCURSIVITY AND NON-DISCURSIVITY (W. SHAKESPEARE AND B. JONSON)

Shakespeare, *Measure for measure* (1604? Pub. 1623)

(from Oxford Dict.: “The Duke of Vienna, on the pretext of a journey to Poland, hands over the government to Angelo, that he may escape the odium of enforcing laws against unchastity that have long been disregarded. Angelo at once sentences to death Claudio as guilty of seduction. Claudio sends word of his position to his sister Isabella, a novice, and begs her to intercede with Angelo. Isabella’s prayers fail to win her brother’s pardon, but her beauty awakens Angelo’s passion, and, at a second interview, he offers her her brother’s life if she will sacrifice to him her honour. Isabella indignantly refuses; Claudio, momentarily weakening, pleads with her for his life”. Here the Duke, who has not left Vienna, but assumed the disguise of a friar, comes to visit Claudio in his prison, while contriving to save him.)

ACT THREE

SCENE I. *The prison.*

Enter DUKE, disguised as before, CLAUDIO, and PROVOST.

Duke. So, then you hope of pardon from Lord Angelo?

Claud. The miserable have no other medicine

But only hope:

I have hope to live, and am prepar’d to die.

Duke. Be absolute for death; either death or life

Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life.

If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing

That none but fools would keep. A breath thou art,

Servile to all the skyey influences,

That dost this habitation where thou keep’st

Hourly afflict. Merely, thou art Death’s fool;

For him thou labour’st by thy flight to shun

And yet runn’st toward him still. Thou art not noble;

For all th’ accommodations that thou bear’st

Are nurs'd by baseness. Thou'rt by no means valiant;
 For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork
 Of a poor worm: thy best of rest is sleep,
 And that thou oft provok'st; yet grossly fear'st
 Thy death, which is no more. Thou art not thyself;
 For thou exists on many a thousand grains
 That issue out of dust. Happy thou art not;
 For what thou hast not, still thou striv'st to get,
 And what thou hast, forget'st. Thou art not certain;
 For thy complexion shifts to strange effects,
 After the moon. If thou art rich, thou'rt poor;
 For, like an ass whose back with ingots bows,
 Thou bear'st thy heavy riches but a journey,
 And Death unloads thee. Friend hast thou none;
 For thine own bowels which do call thee sire,
 The mere effusion of thy proper loins,
 Do curse the gout, serpigo, and the rheum,
 For ending thee no sooner. Thou hast nor youth nor age,
 But, as it were, an after-dinner's sleep,
 Dreaming on both; for all thy blessed youth
 Becomes as aged, and doth beg the alms
 Of palsied eld; and when thou art old and rich,
 Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb, nor beauty,
 To make thy riches pleasant. What's yet in this
 That bears the name of life? Yet in this life
 Lies hid moe thousand deaths; yet death we fear,
 That makes these odds all even.

Claud. I humbly thank you.

To sue to live, I find I seek to die;
 And, seeking death, find life. Let it come on.

Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (1606)

(id. "Volpone, a rich Venitian without children, feigns that he is dying in order to draw gifts from his would-be heirs. Mosca, his parasite and confederate, persuades each of these in turn that he is to be the heir." Such has just been the case with Corvino here.)

[Exit CORBACCIO]

VOLPONE [*Leaping up*]

O I shall burst;

Let out my sides, let out my sides—

MOSCA

Contain

Your flux of laughter, sir. You know this hope
Is such a bait, it covers any hook.

VOLPONE

O, but thy working, and thy placing it!
I cannot hold; good rascal, let me kiss thee:
I never knew thee, in so rare a humour.

MOSCA

Alas, sir, I but do, as I am taught;
Follow your grave instructions; give 'em words;
Pour oil into their ears; and send them hence.

VOLPONE

'Tis true, 'tis true. What a rare punishment
Is avarice, to itself!

MOSCA

Ay, with our help, sir.

VOLPONE

So many cares, so many maladies,
So many fears attending on old age,
Yea, death so often called on, as no wish
Can be more frequent with 'em, their limbs faint,
Their senses dull, their seeing, hearing, going,
All dead before them; yea, their very teeth,
Their instruments of eating, failing them:
Yet this is reckoned life! Nay, here was one,
Is now gone home, that wishes to live longer!
Feels not his gout, nor palsy, feigns himself
Younger by scores of years, flatters his age,
With confident belying it, hopes he may
With charms, like Aeson, have his youth restored:
And with these thoughts so battens, as if fate
Would be as easily cheated on, as he,
And all turns air! *Another knocks*
Who's that, there, now? a third?

MOSCA

Close, to your couch again; I hear his voice.
It is Corvino, our spruce merchant.

VOLPONE [*Lying down*]

Dead.

MOSCA

Another bout, sir, with your eyes. Who's there?

Measure for measure, Act three, scene 1: at the beginning of the scene we know that Claudio, who has been condemned for having enforced laws against unchastity, feels weak in his prison and pleads for his life. So the

Duke, who is disguised, tries to cheer him up and to save him from his weakness, during a long declamatory speech with lots of arguments. At the end of our text, Claudio thanks the “Duke” for being so kind, but he is still convinced he is going to die.

In Jonson’s *Volpone*, the text which is situated before Corvino’s entrance is a sort of *a parte* between Volpone and his confederate Mosca: they enjoy Volpone’s deceiving his would-be heirs. At the end of the text, as Corvino is about to enter, they leave language aside and set themselves out to take serious action.

Both texts raise the question of the power of language. Yet, we will see that Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s rhetorics are indicative of a certain cynicism towards language. The latter rejects the “discursivity” of words, whereas the former seems to show this discursivity in order to suggest its vanity, hence warps it.

It is obvious, in Shakespeare’s scene, that the predominant structure is the syntactic “thou are (not)”. This simple way to determine a subject by a predicate is the formal presence in the text of the Duke’s trying to define Claudio, while addressing Life. The Duke’s discourse pretends to find its origin in the constative form, in the recording, the certifying, the observation. So it declares itself as naming “objectivity”. Thus, the Duke’s discourse is a way to objectivate Claudio: it is pure “reification” and “essentialization” of alterity. Of course this concerns only his discourse, because we must bear in mind the theatrical nature of the scene, including the disguise.

But the difference between Shakespeare and Jonson is that what the former treats in forms of discursivity corresponds to what Jonson expresses in the ways of amplification: the recurrence of the coordinating conjunction “for” is supposed to rationalize, to ground the statement “thou are (not)” (“Happy thou are not; for what thou hast not, still thou striv’st to get”); such is the case with the Duke’s first sentence with “so” and “then”, which are discursive markers and posit, right from the beginning, the Duke’s position, which is that of persuasion. There is a whole syntactic determination of discursivity with the absolute disjunction “*either death or life*” and the use of “thereby”, “thus”, “yet”, “still” in relation to this deductive/discursive form.

On the contrary, Jonson’s attitude towards eloquence is that of a refusal of discursivity: Volpone’s speech on death is not structured by an effect of measure and order but by a movement of amplification through different ways. Amplification is based on intensification by adverbs of quantity (“so many”), on repetition (“so many” is used three times, “with” five times)

and accumulation of determinations (“their limbs faint, their senses dull, their seeing, hearing, going”). The exclamative form “O!” and the “imperative” one (“let out my sides”) enhance this presence of the feeling as opposed to the Duke’s deductive discourse. This could also be grounded by some rhetorical effects such as the paratactic impression given by the anacoluthon: “here was one, is now gone home, that wishes to live longer”: which, in fact, is a mere presence of question of words, literally theatrical in a way.

In their ways of expounding their judgment, the Duke and Volpone are opposed on the level of discursive/non-discursive speech. But what does ground these discourses which do not advocate “description” just in order to define? Is not description an oblique moral instance?

What strikes one as remarkable about Jonson is the impact of some keywords in his text, the obvious contrast between the familiar register of such words as “yea” or “nay” and the importance of its “significance”. In fact, the presence of these words reveals the fake absence of the other: they hint at Mosca of course, but chiefly at the spectator of the play or at the reader; they are the implicit didacticism of the text, or at least its moral dimension.

There is a whole semantic field of corporeality which develops this idea of man’s baseness near death: “limbs”, “senses”, “teeth”, “gout”. Moreover, the function of the “-ing” form in the accumulation “their seeing, hearing, going” is that of concretization. And this concretization contains an implicit contempt: it reaches its climax with the absolute power of materialization of the phrase “their instruments of eating”. The exclamatory form of the phrase “Yet this is reckoned life!” achieves this moral denunciation of meanness and allows for this second level of interpretation (even if it is primarily part of a grossly used “Hamletian” problematic issue of reality).

This structural morality is linked in fact to cynicism. Though present in Shakespeare’s text, it is launched by another mechanism. The “reproach-discourse” in the Duke’s tirade does not proceed with particularization as that denouncing of man’s delusions but (and it is perhaps more adequate) with the generalization function of language.

What we have called reification in our first part is the sign of something derogatory, hence the “thou are (not)”-structure as that form of judgment of value. For instance, it is amazing to see how, to Claudio, the general is something immediate: questioned by the Duke about his hope, he does not answer in terms of subjectivity but the “ego function” of language is de-centered, so that he says “the miserable have no other

medicine/But only hope” instead of “I have no...”. Here again, this could also be analyzed as merely discursive, the most important being the constant echo of the simulacrum. And Volpone’s phrase “reckoned life” is also taken up by the Duke with the indignant question “What’s yet in this that bears the name of life?”—the most important thing being the name and not the life, the dignity in the way of life and not life itself. Yet we have to mention that Shakespeare has also a concrete vocabulary of corporal servility (“bowels”, “loins”, “gout”, “serpigo”, “rheum”, etc.), but, as opposed to Jonson, it does not give the significance: it only means that the general lies in the particular.

Shakespeare’s working out of generalization is an important spotting, for it allows for the staging of the power of language through the Duke’s discourse, and is much more specifically referential: throughout the *conchetto* and the Hamletian dialectic, etc. Hence: the ways of antithesis, the structure of impossibility, the forms of contradiction and paradox.

The opposition between “the miserable” and “hope” reveals Claudio’s contradiction who grants the Duke that he has hope, but at the same time subordinates his particular condition to the miserable, thus declares the logical relations between what he does (he hopes) and what he should do (find a means and not hope for an end). In fact, this dualist rhetoric foreshadows the whole pattern of the famous life/death *conchetto*, basically connected with the themes of deception.

“*I have hope to live, and am prepar’d to die*”: once more, two irreconcilable spheres, a paradoxical rhetoric, a rhetoric of paradox as a junction of realism and idealism. In fact, contradiction is a form of logic: that of the weak. Claudio feels, understands that his *being* is constituted by his powerlessness, he feels *determined* by his *being*, so that his having has no power on his being. He thinks he cannot change his being (a miserable one), because his having is something *added* to his being, not a part of it. To him, the having is not a necessity, thus cannot *determine* the being. He has not understood that the being only changes with the fluctuations of possessions. Hope is considered as a static hope, as non-action. The punctuation “:” just before the figure of the paradox is indicative of Claudio’s thinking it logical to act according to what he is, whereas action supposes what must be.

The figure of contradiction of “the slave of himself” is metaphorised by the staging of the prison (we must keep in mind the *didascalía*) and enhanced by such words as “servile”, “fear”, “afflict”, “a breath (thou art)”. The immobility of hope is staged by the “habitation”, which accounts for the fact that Claudio is the prisoner of such abstract entities as

“life” and “death” (see the use of “for” and “with” as semiotic operators of embodiment of these abstractions). Claudio’s inner-contradiction is denounced by the Duke every time he uses “still” or “yet” (“Thy best of rest is sleep./And that thou oft provok’st; yet grossly fear’st/Thy death”). But the climax of paradox is reached with: “thou are not thyself”, which means “thou are what thou are not”, or at least “thou are the other of thyself”: it presupposes a scission in Claudio that implies the sway of his weakness over his strength. “If thou art rich, thou’rt poor”: the more you hope, the less you act; the paradox is in complete accord with the logic of the weak for it shows, in the same individual, the dying part fighting with the living one. “Living death” is the oxymoronic presence in the rhetoric of a *real* impossibility, the paradox being that form of paralysis, which is so important for the staging.

Where Jonson cynically denounces man’s illusion of deceiving his fate, Shakespeare gives himself the means of warping language to develop the figure of “living death”. Hence the opposition between what we called discursivity and non-discursivity is rhetorically created by a whole working out of concretization and generalization, of amplification and paradox (which is so decisive for the central theatrical sign, the Shakespearian dramatic irony leading to a constant game between the literary and the dramatic): on the one hand, the relative rhetoric of an absolute attitude; on the other hand, the absolute rhetoric of a relative faith.

CHAPTER TWO

DIARYING: INFORMATION, DEFORMATION AND REFORMATION (J. EVELYN AND S. PEPYS)

John Evelyn (1620-1706), his *Memoirs Comprising his DIARY* (Pub. 1818)

1666, 2ND SEPT.—This fatal night, about ten, began that deplorable fire near Fish Street, in London.

3RD.—The fire continuing, after dinner I took coach with my wife and son, and went to the Bank-side in Southwark, where we beheld that dismal spectacle, the whole city in dreadful flames near the waterside; all the houses from the bridge, all Thames Street, and upwards towards Cheapside, down to the Three Cranes, were now consumed.

The fire having continued all this night (if I may call that night which was as light as day for ten miles round about, after a dreadful manner), when conspiring with a fierce eastern wind in a very dry season; I went on foot to the same place, and saw the whole south part of the city burning from Cheapside to the Thames, and all along Cornhill (for it kindled back against the wind as well as forward), Tower Street, Fenchurch Street, Gracechurch Street, and so along to Bainsard's Castle, and was now taking hold of St. Paul's Church, to which the scaffolds contributed exceedingly. The conflagration was so universal, and the people so astonished, that from the beginning, I know not by what despondency or fate, they hardly stirred to quench it; so that there was nothing heard or seen but crying out and lamentation, running about like distracted creatures, without at all attempting to save even their goods: such a strange consternation there was upon them so as it burned both in breadth and length, the churches, public halls, exchange, hospitals, monuments, and ornaments, leaping after a prodigious manner from house to house, and street to street, at great distances one from the other; for the heat, with a long set of fair and warm weather, had even ignited the air and prepared the materials to conceive the fire, which devoured after an incredible manner, houses, furniture, and everything. Here we saw the Thames covered with good floating, all the barges and boats laden with what

some had time and courage to save, as, on the other, the carts, etc., carrying out to the fields, which for many miles were strewed with movables of all sorts, and tents erecting to shelter both people and what goods they could get away. Oh the miserable and calamitous spectacle! such as haply the world had not seen the like since the foundation of it, nor be outdone till the universal conflagration. All the sky was of a fiery aspect, like the top of a burning oven, the light seen above forty miles round about for many nights. God grant my eyes may never behold the like, now seeing above 10,000 houses all in one flame: the noise, and cracking, and thunder of the impetuous flames, the shrieking of women and children, the hurry of people, the fall of towers, houses, and churches was like an hideous storm, and the air all about so hot and inflamed, that at last one was not able to approach it; so that they were forced to stand still and let the flames burn on, which they did for near two miles in length and one in breadth. The clouds of smoke were dismal, and reached, upon computation, near fifty miles in length. Thus I left it this afternoon burning, a resemblance of Sodom, or the last day. It forcibly called to my mind that passage—*non enim hic habemus stabilem civitatem*. London was, but is no more!

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), his *Diary* (Pub. 1825)

SEPT. 2ND. (Lord's day)—Some of our maids sitting up late last night to get things ready against our feast to-day, Jane called us up about three in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the City. So I rose, and slipped on my night-gown, and went to her window; and thought it to be on the back-side of Marl-lane at the farthest; but, being unused to such fires as followed, I thought it far enough off; and so went to bed again, and to sleep. About seven rose again to dress myself, and there looked out at the window, and saw the fire not so much as it was, and further off. So to my closet to set things to rights, after yesterday's cleaning. By and by Jane comes and tells me that she hears that above 300 houses have been burned down to-night by the fire we saw, and that it is now burning down all Fish Street, by London Bridge. So I made myself ready presently, and walked to the Tower, and there got up upon one of the high places, Sir J. Robinson's little son going up with me; and there I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side the end of the bridge; which, among other people, did trouble me for poor little Michell and our Sarah on the bridge. So down, with my heart full of trouble, to the Lieutenant of the Tower, who tells me that it begun this morning in the King's baker's house in Pudding-lane, and that it hath burned down St. Magnus's Church and most part of Fish Street already. So I down to the water-side, and there got a boat, and through bridge, and there saw a lamentable fire. Poor Michell's house, as far as the Old Swan, already burned that way, and the fire running further, that, in a very little time, it got as far as the Steele-yard, while I was there. Every body endeavouring to remove their goods, and flinging into the river, or bringing

them into lighters that lay off; poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats, or clambering from one pair of stairs, by the waterside, to another. And, among other things, the poor pigeons, I perceive, were loth to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconys, till they burned their wings, and fell down. Having staid, and in an hour's time seen the fire rage every way; and nobody, to my sight, endeavouring to quench it, but to remove their goods, and leave all to the fire; and, having seen it get as far as the Steele-yard, and the wind mighty high, and driving it into the City, and everything, after so long a drought, proving combustible, even the very stones of churches; and, among other things, the poor steeple by which pretty Mrs.—lives, and whereof my old schoolfellow Elborough is parson, taken fire in the very top, and there burned till it fell down; I to White Hall, with a gentleman with me, who desired to go off from the Tower, to see the fire, in my boat; and there up to the King's closet in the Chapel, where people come about me, and I did give them an account dismayed them all, and word was carried in to the King. So I was called for, and did tell the King and Duke of York what I saw; and that, unless his Majesty did command houses to be pulled down, nothing could stop the fire. They seemed much troubled, and the King commanded me to go to my Lord Mayor from him, and command him to spare no houses, but to pull down before the fire every way. The Duke of York bid me tell him, that if he would have any more soldiers, he shall; and so did my Lord Arlington afterwards, as a great secret.

Both Pepys's *Diary* and Evelyn's *Memoirs Comprising his Diary* present us with a special presence of reflexivity in literature: the diary or "how to *relive* the emotions and experiences of the day". In the texts we intend to comment upon, we find the same event, namely the Great Fire that destroyed parts of London in 1666: the impulse that prompts Pepys and Evelyn to record is precisely the opportunity to *meet the chance* as a real *meeting with the image*, the image being here met by chance and revealing in their lives an unobserved lack, that forces them to get rid of the usual language to find another one. This is worked out by the whole mechanism of information, "deformation" and reformation, within the form of the diary, which allows for narcissism by distancing in Pepys, by irony in Evelyn (even if there is much irony in Pepys too).

Right at the beginning of Pepys's text, we have the mark of the diary, that is to say the date. ("Lord's day"): a catastrophe on Sunday, some trouble when you wish for peace—which will appear, once the text read, as retrospective irony, but fatal irony. There is a sort of exasperation towards reality apprehended as fatality (plus the foolish non-interest). But it is not given too much importance, Pepys noticing it, but between

brackets: *informing discretely*; whereas in Evelyn, the diary, as that form of information, functions in a completely different manner. For example, the deictic “this” at the beginning of the text, is indicative of another status of the report: not reporting in fact, as in Pepys, but a *remembering report*. This is the whole retrospective perspective of the narrative in Evelyn, memoirs comprising the diary.

The relation between information and the event reported, actually, is that of interest, that is to say, etymologically, *inter-esse*, “being in it”. If we pay attention to the phrase “the fire continuing” and the implicit meaning of it, we will find in this insistence on the event the definition of reality as the cause of the writer’s deference: “we beheld that dismal spectacle” is a phrase likely to suggest that the event is apprehended as dismal, but also—and chiefly—as a spectacle. This insistence on the event is then the sign that the only thing to do with it—as far as the diarist is concerned—is to take advantage of it: *to please the event*. While in Pepys this relation is completely redefined. For instance, the subordinating conjunction “so” is supposed to refer to a relation of cause and effect, but it is weakened by repetition. Thus the necessity of a train of facts, implied in “so”, turns to the impression of juxtaposition as another—but uncontrolled—necessity, that is to say fatality (a need of concealed literality too). Besides, the description is completely saturated with the coordinating conjunction “and”, which warps the subordinating function of the “so”, that is then given the same level of effect as a simple “and”: “and” contaminates “so”. This process finds its acme with the merging together of the two conjunctions in the phrase “and so” (see also the “and there”). With the “and”, the description as juxtaposition is paratactic, indicative of an absence of relation and, in fact, of comprehension: the importance of the event—the Great Fire—is misunderstood. Fatality is in the report, not in the object of it. The sight is guilty, because sight is faulty and there is sin in the sight. *Information should be/is necessarily deformation*.

In fact, we have in Pepys a pictorial approach of description. The recurrence of the form “and there” implies a visualization of the scene, informing being depicting. There is a complete de/signing (of) the object of the discourse, Pepys *taking up the sign of(f) reality*. The form of the diary reveals us the need for expression based on a little inventive talent, the outlet of the creative *manqué* writer. Thus there is in Pepys an absence of imagination and figuring. Deformation is that complementary aspect of the formation of the self through the diary, of in-formation. Pepys is informed by reality instead of informing about it, but he stays himself as

acting upon reality. In fact, the problem of the diarist is formulated through the following equation: “how should I live?”: “what should I look at?” And the final proposition “unless his Majesty did command houses to be pulled down, nothing could stop the fire” conveys the idea that the only condition to solve the problem is to favour its mechanism so that it should be destroyed by its own excess, which means: partiality to the system. We also find this conception in Evelyn, but worked out through the image of the Fire itself. Evelyn even parallels the “universal conflagration” with “foundation”, the Fire being that *solution in destruction*. This is the image of the text as deformation or—as Roland Barthes would have said—as an “inferno of sense”.

The “diarying-act”, as that texturing of every day, is determined by its principle, which is the “Last day” for Evelyn, that is to say its end. Hence the apocalyptic vision of the Fire as that last Image, the “last day” as that image of Apocalypse. “Forced to stand still and let the flames burn on”, the diarist is a victim of the sight as that *necessity of passivity*. Hence the final image of Sodom, which is also a complete re-figuration. This figuring of sight is also prominent in Pepys. “To see the fire, in my boat”: the irony of this sentence is the effect of a discrepancy between the seeing and the acting. The whole pattern of diarying is to see the principle of destruction, the problem, the evil, but not to act against it. The reason of this powerlessness is to be found in the deficiency of the diarist’s relief-sight, of his sight in space: “thought it to be [...] at the farthest”/“far enough off” (even if this is before the seeing precisely: the failure); the diarist Pepys, precisely, suffers from strabismus for the opposition of the two previous phrases means: *things come to you quicker than you think*. The responsibility of the diarist is now in cause: things are nearer than he sees, things happen faster than he thinks.

Hence: all the functioning of distancing as the only possibility in Pepys for re-formation. As a matter of fact, the presence of the ellipsis is worth noticing. Whether it be the ellipsis of the subject (“about seven [...] rose”) or chiefly of the verb (“so [...] to my closet”; “so [...] down”; “So I [...] down”; “So [...] to”), the reporting act is often marked by a discontinuity between the subject of the spectacle and the object of it. The *ellipsis* corresponds to the need to report only the facts, never the modality of what is happening. In Evelyn, reformation is interiorized: “God grant my eyes may never behold”. This has to be taken as a double entendre: asking for a better spectacle and, at the same time, asking for the *absence of what he is doing*. “I know not by what despondency or fate”: saying less than what he knows, denying the knowing. *Postulated self-denial* or would-be

ignorance: this is Evelyn's irony as that fundamental condition of the reformation of reality by the self.

We could find an example of Evelyn's irony by reformation ("such a strange consternation there was upon them *so as* it burned") in his ironically—but willingly—merging the cause and the effect together: "consternation implies burning" instead of "burning implies consternation". This finds its acme in the irony on bad fate: "what some had time and courage to save", even if one could think there isn't any thematized ironical pattern here. Evelyn's *fatal irony* on courage consists in mocking the value of hope by undermining the notion of it with the conviction that it rather refers to the so-called instinct of self-preservation ("to save").

The ways of irony often correspond to an implicit narcissism. Such is the case with Pepys and his constantly working out of *distancing* through the interpolated clause. For instance the use of "among other people" functions as a hyperbolic precision of the detail in spite of the importance of troubles caused by the Great Fire (being in a way out of control the whole time). Picking up Michell and Sarah, Pepys reveals his interest in what is in relation with him. Distancing appears as that interest in description, not in its object. "With my heart full of trouble", develops the use of the interpolated clause as *nota bene*, hence a matter-of-course exposition of the writer's feeling perverted by irony: *the interpolated clause or the excess of information* as lack of commitment. Distance is preserved by the excess of evidence.

The predominant sign of the texts, namely "diarying", appears finally as indicative of *a matter-of-course acceptance of problems* in Pepys, the diary being the only possibility for him *to humanize history*, and of self-revelation in Evelyn, the diary being then the need to write *de vita propria*. But in both cases—should it be informing or remembering report—distancing and irony are that interest in the self, narcissism being the passage from self-expression to self-exposure.