1986

The Subject and Wonder

Aldo Gargani

Recommended Citation

The Subject and Wonder

Aldo Gargani

> The tree can become a burning flame,
> Man a speaking flame.
>> Novalis, *Fragments*

> At his best, the poet can hope to attain
> two things: to represent, represent his
> times, that is, or else to present
> something whose time has not yet
> come.
>> I. Bachman, *Fragen und Scheinfragen*

Problems and critical intellectual attitudes spring from wonder and astonishment in the face of what surrounds us. But this "us" neither is nor ought to be clear: at most it is probably characterized contextually as that which experiences wonder. Wonder is not like curiosity about particular facts, such as how many examples of an old Dutch stamp survive, or how many particles make up the nucleus of a hydrogen atom. The problem is that there exists a whole cluster of expressions which have used (sometimes in banal,

unrealistic, or unintelligible ways) the concept of the "lived" in connection with "immediacy," "direct apprehension," or "empathy with persons and life-situations." This was a radical and courageous enterprise, motivated by the desire to transcend the literal versions and norms of professional, institutionalized, official culture. Nevertheless, the concept of the "lived" has failed to extricate itself from those foundational epistemological presuppositions of the culture it was to surpass, for it presupposes a founding, centered subject, albeit one who wanted to look elsewhere for the fulfillment of abilities repressed or ignored by the official culture. Often, then, the "lived" has appeared as but one fragment of a centered structure—the subject, the "I"—other components of which have attracted more attention from hard disciplines such as neurophysiology and logic. In other words, I think that the "lived" has been regarded as just one facet of an "I," a subject about which we have pretended to know too much. In fact, it is precisely this pretending to know too much, an attitude hidden in every nook and cranny of Western culture, which accounts for the above characteristics which have attended the notion of the "lived."

Examined closely, the attitudes of *knowing too much* or *assuming too much* (even if implicit and involuntary) are not really forms of knowledge or cognition, but rather networks of classifications, categorically divided, which determine how problems are conceptualized, or how intellectual disciplines and attitudes are defined. Foundational epistemology and universal languages grounded in either physiology or transcendental structures are not really knowledge of anything in particular, but are categories and classifications which pay lip service to current science out of a need for security or a nostalgia for childhood lullabies. Very often a philosophical discussion presents itself as a conflict between different tendencies which would lead to different types of classification. Often, too, in an attempt to achieve security, a third category is coined which reconciles two others previously considered antithetical. The resulting discussion looks like a professional philosophical argument between opposing parties, but the apparent conflict is often an illusion, for it is really the categories that are opposed to each other, not the philosophers. It's not so much a struggle as a difference in positions which gets mistaken for a discussion. It's as if there were a battle without a battlefield: the conflict is up in the clouds, not here.

Naturally, both the existence of the conflict and its degree of reality depend on the necessity of the problem, which in turn depends solely on how much effort one wishes to expend on it, on

the strength of one's commitment to re-explore literal, traditionally established and protected norms and texts with atypical and as yet unestablished approaches and values. What I want to say is that problems have become more rewarding than solutions. Manipulating normative, literal philosophical categories such as realism, conventionalism, physicalism, transcendentalism, and their ilk no longer seems meaningful; it has become more like setting the table than dining.

The thing that imprisons humans and saps their strength, perhaps even makes them tremendously unhappy, is their groundless presupposition that they know so much. Isn't it about time we replaced this with an admission of ignorance? I'm not just talking about the obvious, easy cases—strong theories like realism, physicalism, doctrines of transcendentals. I want to discuss difficult cases which are believed to recognize the crucial importance of the disquieting, the problematic, the desperate: everything which seems to have given free rein to life as lived— with its personal reactions, its yearnings, its paradoxes—poised over the abyss. Suppose we take Kafka's work, with its desperate search for justice, meaning, explanation. How much critical literature is ready to interpret him as saying that these goals are impossible ones, that they represent unanswerable questions! Wasn't it Kafka himself who said, in his *Oktavhefte,* that his search had taken him beyond life and humanity? He wrote: "At first I was astonished that my questions hadn't been answered; now I wonder how I could ever have asked them." The questions having been impossible ones, they shouldn't have been asked. Doesn't Wittgenstein say the same thing: that often our questions are devoid of sense? Today it's common to assume that merely admitting that certain questions cannot be asked implies that we know the limits of possible questions. Isn't the point of Kafka's parable of the guardian and the peasant before the gate of the law *(Vor dem Gesetz)* that it is necessary to cross over this threshold, and enter into life and justice, rather than ask so many questions; that in reality it's not the guardians who constitute the fundamental obstacle, but rather our questions? According to Wittgenstein, we should stay within the limits of our ordinary language and not ask meaningless questions; Kafka seems to say that we should participate in life and justice instead of asking questions, as if up to now we weren't right here, where we are, immersed in our ordinary language, our life, our observance, such as it is, of laws and justice. Place yourself in your own form of life *(Lebensform),* recommends Wittgenstein, who, in spite of the fact that this is not all nor even the best thing he says,

claims that if *you* are not in tune with *your* particular form of life, the responsibility is squarely *yours*. Participate in forms of life and justice; don't get sidetracked asking impossible or meaningless questions. But how could we even make a claim like this unless we had a certain reserve stock of intellectual certitude? Isn't the very claim that some things are nonsense a certitude; that is, isn't it already too large a claim? But perhaps this type of disquieting intellectual spasm, this paradox, just ends up substituting a new kind of norm for that which it opposes. I ask, is it really possible to delve into some intellectual hinterland to find a response to all the doubts, questions, paradoxes formulated by our past culture? In spite of their gravity, these problems and paradoxes seem rooted in a field which contains the seeds of their solutions. But this is not necessarily true. Doesn't the very notion of a paradox imply the need for a new language? Because of this, we are disposed to reject reconstructions or solutions which remain within the terms of the problem, accepting the assumption that problems arise along with the germ of their solutions. And it is precisely this refusal which generates wonder—the non-assumption of excessive knowledge. In *The Man Without Qualities*, Ulrich, after having lost the significance of what we ordinarily call "spirit" or "intelligence," despairs of ever finding it; nevertheless, he continues to feel its attraction, just as one might continue throughout one's life to love a constantly unfaithful woman, never loving her any less for her betrayal. We should take his paradox seriously: he encounters things in a new way, since "when one loves, everything is love, even when it is pain and horror." To the man without qualities, things don't seem made of wood or stone, but rather of a grand, delicate immorality which transforms itself into a profound moral emotion the moment it comes in contact with him.[1] What are we to make of this and similar paradoxes, problems, and contradictions? Up to now the culture has domesticated them, relegating them to the pre-wonder state which their very existence had already transcended. Even wonder itself has usually been *explained away*, its most heady and disturbing moments reduced to the already familiar. The tactic has usually been to claim that a particular person had a particular experience in a particular place which caused his feeling of perplexity or disquiet. But this move just forgets all the distinctions that have been made between the natural and the human sciences, between positivism, empiricism, and reductivism, on the one hand, and hermeneutics on the other. In the face of the riskiest, most terrifying events or mental experiences, the same old nomological-deductive methods of the natural sciences

have been reductively employed. This is what takes place every time a lived experience, manifestation, or symbolic form of wonder gets explained away: civilization, the crisis of language, the man without qualities' grand immorality of things which changes into a profound moral emotion, even Kafka's himself, or his peasant before the threshold of the law, blocked by his own questions from doing what he should: crossing it. The same applies to the tactic of claiming that we are stuck with a whole series of improperly formulated problems because we fail to respect the limits of ordinary language. All these explanations follow the same pattern: we ape the physical sciences with their subsumption of phenomena under covering laws every time we assume that problems, paradoxes, wonder itself can be explained away using the old language in which they were formulated. To illustrate, take a film plot: a happily married man pretends, with his wife's knowledge, that he is having an affair. He disguises himself and forces a doctor who has been blackmailing him to break into the safe at the firm where he himself works. He convinces the police that the doctor did it, but at the end, having been abandoned by the wife he used and abused, gives the money to the police, knowing that he's finished anyway, and thus becomes a suspect. But a plot like this admits of many interpretations. We might say that the thirst for money destroys the sanctity of love, even if motivated by love. Or perhaps that the guilty are always caught, or that love is stronger than lust for money and possessions, compelling the criminal to give himself up at the end. These are among our pat interpretations. So why, then, was the film made if we already knew what it was going to say? Certainly trite films are made deliberately, but this isn't always the case. One can always look for something new; even the most apparently banal or mediocre films might contain something *important* or *significant*. In this one, for example, we might say that the meaning of the whole complicated intrigue—a man, seemingly victimized, in reality exploits another man under threat, becomes his own safecracker, but then, at the end, undoes the whole thing, ending up with neither love nor money—is really that a man's evil belongs to him, is born, grows, and dies with him. Not in the sense that everyone is the victim of his own errors, but that each is his own fatal, inevitable error with which he must live. Every violation of the other is thus a violation of self, so that the protagonist never succeeds in getting outside of himself. Instead, the end of the tale brings him back to his origin, the origin of a self that is the cause of its evil, breaking, as it were, into the safe of his inner self. This is what he realizes at the end. The protagonist's

wonder, his final paradox, might be that he has never really hurt anyone but himself; in fact, that he has never even really encountered *the other*, remaining imprisoned within himself. It might even be significant that on the very day that the guilty one decides to become the suspect, the police commissioner decides to retire and cultivate his begonias, leaving the criminal to go his own way, unpunished, but watching from his high office window, as if his eye were following the suspect through the streets. Perhaps the commissioner has discovered that the man walking away has sinned against himself alone, and that there is thus no point in interfering. But the wonder belongs above all to the criminal himself, who at the end discovers something he had never even suspected during his past life. Is he then back where he began, as if he hadn't stolen anything? After all, he has neither the money nor the woman he loved. I would say not. The film ends exactly where it should: at the moment when the protagonist is rooted in the wonder which has suspended his world.

Wonder *(stupore)* has the function of setting things in motion. But if we tie it to the *lived (vissuto)* assuming that the latter is a private and inaccessible entity (an assumption that has provoked justified attacks from analytic philosophers), wonder appears as the opposite of what it really is. Instead, wonder is the state in which one recognizes that one is not what one is or thought oneself to be. Wonder is the event that produces a dissociation of the person *(persona)*, if the latter is understood as that bearer of consciousness who is usually manifested in various institutionalized social or familial roles, or is invested with a known form of consciousness or self. The wonderer becomes something else as the self splits; there is a feeling of being the source of one's own presence in life, not of being an inaccessible and private entity. Thus wonder is a structurally ambiguous condition: it destroys our habitual faith in the *person* to which we ordinarily entrust ourselves, stirring up, as a by-product, a sense of guilt. At the same time, however, it seems to restore our ties with others, our lines of communication with external reality. We regain our closeness and love for this latter, as if we had always loved it and longed for it, even unknowingly. Wonder stirs up what we call consciousness by making it oscillate between the literal person it ordinarily is and that whole other overarching circle of our being which we discover and which we can never know exhaustively. Wonder stirs to action because it causes a wavering between the sense of guilt at having to

abandon, at least partially, the ordinary, limited person, and a sense of being open to a harmony with outer experience and the places where we live, which, though never conclusive, is expansive, fortuitous, a gift. In the act of this transition, this wavering between the person and the self, the scenes of our lives assume the appearance of a grand immorality of things. But the feeling of separation that we can blame on the concentration and restriction of the person is in its own right the source of a different type of guilt feeling—the feeling of being just an isolated self and thus able to avoid love, joy, hope, and suffering. Thus every one of these instances is two-sided. The immorality of things becomes a profound moral emotion because it returns us to a reality we had formerly betrayed, but the price is a new betrayal of the I as a person, that official, institutionalized figure with whom we have lived for so long, if nothing more. This accounts for the resistances, the tragedy which attends the transfiguration of a person. The encounter with reality is the perception of a grand immorality because, as we have seen, when one loves, all is love, even if it is pain and horror. This grand immorality of things and its disquieting effects depend only superficially on a characteristic of immediate sensation. There is really a judgment at issue: to confront or accept the grand immorality is tantamount to judging that things just happen. The "immorality" does not reside in the individual: this way of looking at it is linked to the traditional, rationalistic notion of a founding, centered subject, whose chief characteristic is that nobody is closer to his I than he himself. But we have seen that the mind is anything but closed in on itself, because it is always immersed in circumstances, displaced in a network of accidents, casual possibilities, and chance. The source, the scenario of the immorality is offered by reality itself, with its generous and cynical gift of circumstances and events that just happen. The problem for the person or the more restricted I is how to come to recognize this. That things just happen is a tough idea to swallow for a mind habituated by a long intellectual tradition to regard itself as an ethical subject destined to redeem the world.

Humans are involved in this effort, and it is indeed both difficult and demanding. We can see this demonstrated in art, cinema, and literature, all of which represent ideal types who struggle with this task in their imaginary surroundings in a manner much more coherent than is possible for real humans. Nothing is truer than the commonplace that some things happen only in films, for it is on them that we unleash our irrepressible demand for a coherent paradigm, an exemplary sketch of that truth which

ordinary mortals cannot bear. Just as Mach observed that humans, unlike animals, kill off scientific hypotheses instead of themselves, so one might say that humans make screen characters suffer and die instead of struggling themselves. Hence a certain cowardice characterizes the spectator as such and the culture in general. Contrary to what is generally believed, there is no ethical obligation greater than that which is produced in dealing with the materials and circumstances of risk, of loss, of failure. Nothing is less true than that certain things happen only in films, for they happen to some extent every day in real life. But out of inertia, melancholy, and exhaustion grows a resistance to recognizing that happening right before our eyes are those very things which we exorcised from real life, relegating them to the realm of impersonal, symbolic representations, refusing to take responsibility for them.

In order to make this line of thought more concrete, it is necessary to add an unavoidable theoretical consideration as well as some more examples. The first is that the world as it is given, and however it might be given, does not seem to present the opportunity for that individualization of the self to which wonder and astonishment *(meraviglia)* incite us. Doesn't that mean that we can exist, live, and attain security only with a new language? I mean that language which originates precisely in the separation from the world which persists, remains, and is not displaced by astonishment—that world which remains and persists in its *literalness*, which is, as it were, sanctioned by forms of our institutionalized language. We need a new language in order to reach that meaning and motivation that are inacessible via the literalness of ordinary phrases. Illustrating an unsuccessful instance of communication, Ingeborg Bachman in *Malina* exposes the failure of her partner Ivan's assurances *(assicurazione)*. Ivan explains to her that "we're insured against everything" *(er wird mir wieder erklären, dass wir gegen alles versichert sind)*,[2] "like cars, against earthquakes, hurricanes, thefts, accidents, hailstorms, and all the rest." But *I*—and here I don't say it's either one of the characters or Bachman herself who speaks—but *I* find myself reassured *(assicurato)* by a sentence and not by anything else *(aber ich bin versichert in einem Satz und in sonst nichts)*.[3] And right away she adds: "the world holds no assurance for me" *(Die Welt kennt keine Versicherung für mich)*. It's not the case that we're dealing here with a simple contrast between a substantial, fleshly world whose absence causes insecurity, and

the inadequacy of a simple proposition which is necessarily incapable of replacing it. *Sentences and propositions belong to this world of facts (di quel mondo dato) which gives itself in a static, immovable literalness.* The source of the I's dissatisfaction is neither a sentence nor the absence of a reassuring world, but rather the whole circuit of representation: both the *world* and the *sentence* which *represents* it in all its literalness. In fact, in another passage, Bachman says:

> I never stop hoping, praying, believing that I've heard a sentence—one not born of exhaustion—that makes me feel secure in the world, but what I see seems to be shrinking up, the glands are drying up. . . . All it takes is a sentence to reassure someone who is no longer capable of action. There must exist an assurance which is not of this world. *(Es müste eine Versicherung geben, die nicht von dieser Welt ist.)* [4]

The sentence is insufficient because it represents this given, static, immobile world, but professional academic philosophers pretend that the sentence is something *over and above the world*. Isn't it rather itself a part of this unsatisfying world, which doesn't give meaning and doesn't reassure? In fact, the sentence *doesn't even mirror* this world rigorously, since it *is part* of it. In the literalness of its abstract, institutionalized rigidity, the world is all of a piece with its image. In fact, if it's true that the sentence doesn't reassure, then it follows that it is also true that there must exist a reassurance which is precisely not of this world *(die nicht von dieser Welt ist)*. We are a long way from the notion of a *world which speaks its own sentence,* but not from the separate notions of a world or a sentence.

Mr. Sammler, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet,* opposes himself to the "bad literalness" of common life, with both its ordinary, debilitating demands, and its "old prejudices." He survived one of the Nazis' mass executions, escaping from the ditch the Jews themselves dug, crushed on all sides by corpses, including his "dead wife nearby somewhere." A Pole named Cieslakiewicz saved him, risking his own life. But with the passing of years, heroism disintegrates, ends. The Polish hero falls into his old prejudices again, even to the point of displaying anti-Semitic attitudes.[5] Only Sammler fails to return to normality, continuing to torment himself. He makes an effort, he continues, "trying to perform some kind of symbolic task," but succeeds only in achieving an "unrest, exposure to trouble." In short, "Mr. Sammler had a symbolic character. He himself, personally, was a symbol."[6] But there's a clash between his own aspirations and the

difficulty of incarnating the symbol he himself or others want him to be. In fact, this state of abstraction is strictly tied to his loss of self, his diminished capacity for self-individuation. Doesn't the book even say that "so much of the earlier person had disappeared"? Mr. Sammler escaped from the Nazi death-ditch with a firm resolve to accomplish a symbolic task, that is, to invest his life and situation with meaning and value. Thus Mr. Sammler, who sees the resurgence of rigid old prejudices even in the Pole who saved his life, is a symbol, or better, an attempt at a symbol. The deeper truth of this situation is that the ditch of the world's horrors, which he had escaped, continues to threaten him. Cieslakiewicz, who had saved him, has returned to his anti-Semitism. The grave is still there, waiting to swallow him up. At least it has robbed Sammler of a part of himself, perhaps for life. In the wake of this mutilation, which has brought him from the Nazi grave to the degradation and violence of contemporary New York neighborhoods, Sammler lives out the bitter, anguished life of a *symbolic man*, an *other*, an alternative to ordinary life. His problem is deciding to what extent his life is symbolic, and thus capable of substituting expression, meaning, value, and creativity for mere survival, mere *duration*. "He had lasted," writes Bellow. If his entire existence had been taken away, his existence as a symbolic presence, or what one might call "his other life," there would remain only "that bad literalness, the yellow light of Polish summer heat. . . . Endless literal hours in which one is internally eaten up. Eaten because coherence is lacking."[7] At the end, we are not sure whether Mr. Sammler has really escaped from that death-ditch after all.

How does this all accord with professional philosophy? Do professional philosophers have a monopoly on the experiences of wonder and astonishment? Of course not, for wonder might even work to their detriment. More often than not nowadays, they are and express rather the tiredness, the literalness of the world, the weakness of imprisonment in the given. It might even be that this is the very thing that makes philosophy advance, precisely because it goes against that which philosophy did up to a certain point, within certain limits. At any rate, the point is relevant, for philosophy seems destined to survive only insofar as it renounces its tendency to model itself on specialized and professional disciplines such as physics, chemistry, or mathematics, and joins the ongoing conversation about the events and circumstances of our lives, exploring rare values as yet unestablished and vulnerable.

Thus it is clearly justified to discuss even something like the postman's job, the problematic destiny his work might bring him.

Even here, as in all of life's occupations and situations, one can find a problematic, a wonder, an astonishment which is, as Bachman says, *"der Anfang alles Philosophierens und der Menschwerdung"*[8]— "the beginning of all philosophizing and of the process of becoming human." If philosophy would formally renounce passing itself off as a science like physics or chemistry, or as a theoretical discipline with the task of providing a foundation to forms of knowledge, of separating true knowledge from its pretenders, it could then become a kind of clarification, an illumination of our received cultural contexts, of traditions of thought lived out by us not just *in the midst of* but *because of* the haphazardness and randomness of our lives. But in the midst of this random haphazardness which makes up human lives, philosophical reflection (understood very broadly as conversation) is a conceptual experimentation, a sketching out of new alternatives to established, protected, fixed positions. Philosophical reflection bears fruit if it dedicates itself to tracing out or clarifying new contours or environments for our life, establishing new and unsuspected connections in the course of its encounters or its struggle with chance and haphazardness. If literary narration no longer exists, for the simple reason that there is no world to narrate, since every world is always a world subordinate to a description paradigm, to a model of adopted symbolism; if every world is always and inevitably a version of the world,[9] then a literary or philosophical enterprise—we might even coin the term "philosophico-literary"—aims at deciphering and constructing meanings for the neglected realms of the random and accidental, following out the chain of interests, wonder, fear, and suffering. Naturally, chance is not a fairy-tale event, a miracle or a chimera. Chance should be taken seriously as part of a consciousness of the symbolic essence of the world. We have to take seriously the idea that the world is just a version of the world, in which case chance becomes one of its interstices, a fissure in whose framework the symbolic structuring of our experience is deposited and organized. In this sense it's true that there couldn't be *abnormal discourse* if *normal discourse* did not exist.[10] Chance is an escape route that leads out of the well-fortified symbol mill; it's the unexpected opportunity that opens up in a formerly fixed version of the world. Chance does not resemble tripping over a stone as much as seizing new possibilities which exist within a certain codification of the world or of ordinary life; I would call the accidental, the fortuitous, an ethical opportunity, paradoxical as that may seem. It's a new ethical attitude which predisposes us to recognize chance, the fortuitous, giving it a value, putting it into relief, enlarging our

experience into a self-reckoning. Chance, ethical attitudes, reasons, and the capacity to create experience are all inextricably entwined.

Recognizing the ethical import of chance has an implication equally important: the abolition of the privilege which has so far been accorded to professional philosophers, whom Bachman calls "those who reflect from their offices" *(den Beamtet Reflektieren-den)*. [11] For now we are able to extend to all persons who struggle with doubt and suffering born of their work or situation—whatever these might be—that capacity or occasion of a "thought-willing-being"[12] which up to now has been considered the exclusive privilege of those who hold a teaching position and who reflect on divine existence, on *Ontos on*, on the origin of the earth, or even the origin of all things. We can now separate the notion of a "thought-willing-being" from that of a powerful, founded subject who moves among the great arches of a reflection which aims at consciousness as the definitive, boundless, compelling possession of the whole of reality. [13] Thus freed, this notion can operate on everyday cases of wonder, on less-known but equally important occasions of reflection, doubt, suffering. Take, for example, a postman, Otto Kranewitzer, described by I. Bachman in *Malina*. After thirty years of careful, dutiful, meticulous service, suddenly he begins to stack piles and piles of unsorted mail in his tiny apartment. They reach from the floor to the ceiling; he even has to get rid of his furniture to make room for them. Naturally, he is fired and tried for malversation and abuse of office, since nobody understands why he did it. The source of his action was the pain, the indescribable suffering *(unsägliche Gewissenqualen)*, the doubt which he experienced working with the mail—delivering letters, notes, messages, and cards which caused all that risk and pain inherent in human communication. Bachman observes that the postman sees the recipients blush, tremble, go pale when he delivers their mail. He intuits, suspects, he must know something *(er ahnt etwas, er muss etwas wissen)*. Postman Otto Kranewitzer, comments Bachman, was misunderstood; they didn't realize that "he was driven to reflection, struck with wonder," that wonder which, as it has been said, is the origin of philosophy and of becoming human. [14]

We must observe two things: the first is that the postman's wonder and reflection confounds professional philosophy, committed as it is to categorizing everything there is as part of the "objective world," or the fixed categories of Being. The second is that the postman senses the doubt, wonder, and suffering of mail

circulation without, of course, reading the letters. So it's not just that he invades the domain of wonder and reflection formerly monopolized by professional, specialized, official thought, but he does so utilizing an approach which differs profoundly from that of the *"Beamtet Reflektierenden,"* those who reflect from their offices. This new possibility constitutes chance, its accidental character with respect to the postman's ordinary perceptions, his *letteralness*, if I may be permitted a play on words. In postman Kranewitzer's case, unlike that of "ordinary men," this means a letter is not just a letter, and a stamp not just a stamp. Because of this, he creates an actual crisis with the mail. But his wonder, his reflection, and his suffering with respect to his mission, spring from his new approach to the mail. His problem, his wonder, his suffering, and his final crisis are triggered by the circulation of messages, the materials he carries around, the web of reactions and attitudes of the recipients, what he knows or suspects about them. This new aspect of his attitude, which he deepens, marks out an original horizon of experience and meaning. What counts is not the content of the letters or messages, but a new drama—the interaction of the bearer and receivers of the mail—a real-life scene which substitutes its meaning for the previous one. Before this postman perceived mail circulation in this particular way, these ethical contours, this interpretation of pain, wonder, doubt, and suffering which he enacted had never existed, having been excluded from ordinary, literal discourse.

The transition to this new vision creates a new paradigm of objects in the world, a new chain of details and traces which we can use to appropriate human existence. Bachman writes that for the postman

> our streets were completely familiar; he knew exactly which letters, which stamps, which packages were correctly cancelled. Even so much as a slight difference in address—a name preceded by "Illustrious," a name with no "Mr." or "Mrs." attached, a "Prof. Dr."—told him more about people's attitudes, about generational conflict, about the signs of social upheaval, than our sociologists or psychiatrists ever succeed in finding out. [15]

We can never stop learning useful things from the case of this postman. In fact, we haven't just passed from one vision to another, from an ordinary to an extraordinary one, imbued with new traces, details, and unexpected chance opportunities. Passing from the one to the other in this voyage of discovery, we have gone from a state of grounded, protected erudition to a weak knowl-

edge, a fragmentary state of marginal, external contingency. But this perception is fully aware of two circumstances: one is that the first version or paradigm of our life is that which we were taught, which was transmitted to us, and as such received the stigmata of a powerful legitimation and popularity; the other is that this new paradigm or version of the world does not just mechanically substitute its own symbolic and conceptual arsenal for the old one. It is a painful, laborious reinterpretation of the first, already interpreted world, of human life. Thus there is an *active interchange* between the new, less popular, unestablished values and the older, established and protected ones, between ordinary and extraordinary discourse. The new interpretation has, so to speak, suffused the prior symbolic system with its disquieting breeze, breathing a new contingency, exposing prior limitations, superimposing its new, seemingly unimaginable possibilities, disseminating an ignorance which is all of a piece with it. The old world is thus weakened, made fragile. World history, too, follows this course; human language reworks itself, shines upon itself from behind, pitilessly reinterpreting its own achievements, repositioning itself, but also transforming the immense, omnipresent *present* into the image of a *past*, thus producing the enigma of Time and its History.

1. See Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York, 1953), pp. 180-82.

2. Ingeborg Bachman, *Malina,* in *Werke,* Volume III (München-Zürich, 1982), p. 78.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 74.

5. Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York, 1970), pp. 94-96.

6. Ibid, p. 95.

7. Ibid., p. 96.

8. Bachman, p. 241.

9. See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Sussex, 1978), pp. 3-6, 9, 19-20.

10. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, 1980).

11. See Bachman, p. 242

12. Ibid., p. 241.

13. On this topic see Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (Milano, 1979), and *Le avventure della differenza* (Milano, 1980).

14. See Bachman, pp. 240-41.

15. Ibid., p. 242.