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The Seductiveness of Literature

Giuseppe Sertoli

On n'écrit pas pour se montrer;
on écrit pour *disparaître*.
—B. Pinguad

PROLOGUE

My presence here to talk about the seductiveness of literature is itself probably an effect—however distorted—of seduction, insofar as I felt no particular desire to do so, having never previously even thought of speaking or writing about such a subject. Yet as soon as it was suggested to me I felt somehow “taken.” And this is precisely how seduction works; as Baudrillard says, there is never a subject which desires an object, but rather an object which captures a subject.¹

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[Translated from the Italian by Anne B. McLaughlin]

What was it then that captured me in this suggestion? I would say quite simply the chance I was being offered to reflect for a moment (naturally, with all the subjectiveness which this entails and which I would like to state right from the start) upon something which in our daily work as critics, historians, teachers (alas!) of literature we almost always tend to ignore, that is, the appeal or, if we prefer, the seductiveness which literature exerts upon us—as readers first and foremost, and only secondly as critics, historians, teachers, etc.

A proof of what I have just said, somewhat casual perhaps but no less symptomatic, could be found in the symposium “Professing Literature” which the *Times Literary Supplement* published about a year ago (10/12/1982). In this symposium *all* the participants discussed critical methods, authors’ canons, academic curricula, etc., without *anyone’s* ever asking what a reader looks for in literature, what he finds (or doesn’t find), in other words, *why* he reads. And yet there would be no methods or canons, or teachers or students (not even congresses such as this) if no one read, that is to say if no one, at some time or another, had ever been seduced by literature. It is this seduction, this experience of literature, which constitutes the presupposition for every subsequent discussion *about* literature. It is a kind of primal scene which we are constantly reliving even if we do not refer to it in our daily work, even if we can forget it or refuse to acknowledge it—a kind of indelible “residue” which never ceases to accompany us and perhaps at times to disturb us.

What enticed me about the suggestion made by my friends on the Committee was, then, the chance to approach this difficult and tenebrous core of literature. And when I began asking myself what angle I should approach it from, the only plausible answer seemed to be from the point of view of reading; because it is in reading that literature works its charm and its seduction on us; it is the form which gives us our original experience of it. My talk will therefore be a talk about reading.

1. READING

I will take as my starting point Ruskin’s lecture *Of Kings’ Treasuries* (1864) which, as you know, is about reading.

There are two metaphors, apparently antithetical but in fact homologous, which dominate Ruskin’s talk. The first compares reading to a social act, to “talk.” Reading, says Ruskin, is talking

with those "friends" who are the authors of the books. As Descartes had already said two hundred years earlier, "Reading a good book is like talking with those very great men of former centuries who were the authors."²

In fact, the term "talk" seems inappropriate. Talking involves an exchange of communication between someone who speaks (in this case, the author) and someone who replies (the reader). It always implies a dual relationship and it requires both parties to participate equally actively (even if perhaps at different levels). This, however, is not what Ruskin intends. His "friend" is a teacher, and the communication is one-way: the reader must simply listen silently to the voice of the author. Ruskin repeats this several times: the reader must not add anything of his own to what the author says; he must not allow his own thoughts and words to interfere with the author's. The reading relationship is therefore univocal: the reader must remain passive before the author, particularly since in the author's voice it is the voice of Truth itself ("Nature's dictation"³) that speaks. The reader's silence is the required condition for receiving the author's message, and the transparency of the reader before the author is doubled in the author's transparency before Truth. (This is what Proust rightly calls Ruskin's "Platonism.")

Ruskin goes on to add a second metaphor for reading: reading, he says, is a type of work like that of "Australian miners." The truth which the reader extracts from a book is the gold which the miner digs out of a mine.

Initially, this latter metaphor does not seem to accord with the former one. Not only because reading is shown as a solitary act, but above all because it is shown as an *activity*. To dig out gold, freeing it from the rock which imprisons it, we need spades, shovels and picks, or rather the "care, wit and learning" of the reader. If the book is a message of Truth, reading it will be a deciphering more or less lengthy and difficult, according to how cryptic the inscribed Truth is.

When we look more closely, however, this second metaphor can accord with the first. The excavation involved in reading is by no means an interpretation of the Truth. The gold—like the "wisdom" of the friend-teacher—is there, it is given once and for all and it only requires to be brought to the light by breaking away the rock which imprisons it. "Rocks," for Ruskin, are the words in which the "thoughts," or rather the "intention" of the author has been deposited⁴; but "rock" is also everything which constitutes a

screen for the reader, separating him from the gold. If the reader has to chip away at something, therefore, it is himself. In breaking up the rock, he will indeed use his "equipment" of care, wit and learning, but he will use it against himself, so to speak—until the moment when he has used it all up and he finds himself bare-handed before the gold. In fact, he will find it *in* his hands—and he will come out of the mine with it, returning to the world a rich man, just as the disciple came back from a talk with the master bringing that "wisdom" he had acquired from him.

The metaphor of the mine, however, is significant above all for the way it represents the experience of reading. Reading is self-segregation. Like the miner, the reader leaves behind him the "outside world": other men, his place among them, his own (old) ego. Certainly, he leaves them behind to find them again, to recreate them by re-forming them differently from before (what better symbol of transformation than gold?). But is all this true? Will the miner really be able to come out of the mine with the gold?

At a certain point in Ruskin's lecture, there is an astonishing passage. Wishing to distinguish what he calls "books of the hour" from those which he calls "books of all time," he says that the difference lies in the fact that, while the intention of the former is "communication," that of the latter is "permanence." The "book of the hour" is nothing more than the amplification—the "multiplication" and the "conveyance"—of the voice of the author, who writes it (in the same way as he writes a letter) only because he cannot reach all his (potential) listeners with the spoken word: if he could, he would not write.⁵ On the other hand, the "book of all time"—which Ruskin calls the only true Book—is different because "it is essentially not a talking thing, but a written thing."⁶ Now, what does this mean?

One answer comes to mind immediately. Ruskin, in the manner of Horace and Johnson, is contrasting the lasting with the ephemeral. The "book of the hour" is ephemeral because it is poor and can be immediately deciphered, and therefore the communication between it and the reader is very quickly exhausted; the "book of all time" (the Book of Truth!), on the contrary, is lasting because it is rich and therefore requires a long, indeed infinite effort on the part of the reader to decipher it.

This is, however, a banal answer which confines itself to a conception of the book (and of reading) as communication, and this does not correspond to Ruskin's own idea in *this particular* passage. In fact, after reserving the term "communication" for the "book of the hour" and defining the "book of all time" as "not a

talking thing but a written thing," he adds that it is very difficult to understand it because the author cannot express all his thought there. Indeed, even more strange, he *does not wish to*, either, choosing to express it "in a hidden way and in parables." "I cannot quite see the reason of this," adds Ruskin, "nor analyse that cruel reticence in the breasts of wise men which makes them always hide their deeper thought."⁷

This is frankly an astonishing admission. First of all, reading is presented to us—following the communicative example of conversation—as listening to words; now, instead, these same words are being presented as reticent, indeed as an explicit, voluntary refusal to communicate. And such a refusal appears to be intrinsic to writing, constitutive of the very act of writing. To write is *not* to wish to communicate, or at least to remove something from communication. But what is the reason for this? Ruskin's answer is to some extent obvious: because "wisdom" is a reward which the reader must deserve. Gold can only be the recompense for the efforts made to find it. But it is clear that the question simply repeats itself: why must the gold be sought in this way? Why, instead, can it not be freely offered, donated? And here Ruskin has no reply—except to refer to the inscrutable laws of Nature.⁸

It is surely easy to imagine the direction which a discussion starting from this sentence of Ruskin's could and should take. It is the direction which has been followed, in the twentieth century, by a certain philosophical current, from Heidegger to Lévinas, from Blanchot to Derrida right up to the recent book by Giorgio Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*,⁹ which has questioned the status of writing in its relations with language and with what we usually call (what Ruskin at any rate called) "Truth." (Needless to say, this was a question which lay beyond Ruskin's possibilities, so that in the end he was obliged to admit that he "did not understand.")

I do not intend, however, to take this direction. I will instead keep, as I have done up to now, to the most superficial level of reading. At this level, Ruskin's lecture (undoubtedly going beyond and perhaps despite its author's intentions) brings us to an unexpected conclusion: the descent into the mine, which the act of reading consists of, may perhaps not bring to the light the gold which is to be found there, but may rather lead to the darkness of a rock which remains (as Nietzsche said) to some extent unbreakable, impenetrable. What had initially seemed like the silence of the reader listening to the voice of Truth, now appears to be a silence which, at least partly, sinks into another silence: the author's refusal to speak, and, behind this, the invisibility of a Truth which

(if it exists) is never given entirely, neither to be known nor to be communicated.

As we know, Ruskin's lecture was translated into French by Proust, who accompanied it with a long preface and even longer notes.¹⁰ Proust immediately rejects Ruskin's equation reading=talking. Reading a book, he says, is not like talking to a friend; and the difference does not lie so much in the greater or lesser "wisdom" of one or the other, as in the different type of communication which they give rise to. Reading, says Proust, is "communicating in the bosom of solitude" and books, "the work of solitude," are the "children of silence"—"children" who have nothing in common with the "children of the word."¹¹ Unlike conversation, reading

consists for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought, while nevertheless remaining alone, that is, continuing to enjoy the intellectual power one has in solitude and which talking often dissolves, continuing to be able to be inspired, to remain in the full and fertile work of the spirit on itself.¹²

The difference between Ruskin's (first) type of reading, a public and social act, and Proust's, a private and solitary act, is obvious here. But it is not conclusive. After all, it was Ruskin himself who compared reading to a descent into a mine. The real divergence lies in Proust's rejection of Ruskin's "Platonism." Truth is not something already established outside of ourselves and which we must simply come into possession of—the wisdom of the friend-master, the gold of the mine—but rather something which we must find *inside* ourselves, indeed *produce* by ourselves. Thus Proust says that the experience of reading is an experience of "intellectual strength," of "fertile work of the spirit on itself," and in another passage he adds that the reader "develops his ego" thanks precisely to solitude and *in* it.¹³ Here we see the distance between Proust and Ruskin: for Proust, the work in the mine is not a dissolving of the ego, on the contrary, it is a strengthening of it. The gold is not found but produced. If the written word (and therefore neither for Proust the spoken word) allows the reader to attune himself to the voice of the author,¹⁴ that tuning is also what will allow him to find his *own* voice—which will allow him, therefore, to become an author himself. As Roland Barthes rightly noted, reading for Proust is—and must be—an inducement to writing.¹⁵

On the other hand, throughout these pages of Proust, there is also an insistent warning of a *danger* in reading. "Reading lies on the threshold of spiritual life; it can lead us to it, it does not

constitute it." The book is "the angel which flies away as soon as the gates of the celestial garden are opened." Reading is dangerous if, instead of "giving us the use" of our spiritual activity, it becomes a substitute for it. Then "stillness" takes over from "exaltation," the "principle of death" from the "principle of life," and that Truth which can only be drawn out of ourselves, created by ourselves, is sought outside, like a "material thing placed between the leaves of a book," a treasure already given which we have only to appropriate.¹⁶

This is certainly still part of the anti-Platonic argument; but there is more, which Proust does not dwell upon, which I, on the contrary, would like to emphasize—which, in fact, I will take as the leading thread of my talk.

In a lecture on the education of young girls, *Of Queens' Gardens* (1864), which was also translated and commented upon by Proust, Ruskin condemned the "sore temptation of novel reading": "The best romance," he wrote, "becomes dangerous if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act."¹⁷ This is an old cliché which even in Ruskin's time had more than a century of history behind it (Coleridge had said that girls' reading of eighteenth-century novels was just a form of daydreaming). However, it is worth underscoring the last words quoted, "scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act." When Ruskin denies that reading novels can be educational for women, insofar as what a woman looks for (and finds) in them is only "food" for her "inborn disposition" to fantasy,¹⁸ he is not simply repeating a commonplace on feminine identity; instead he is saying that reading seduces to the extent that, by removing the reader (the female reader!) from the "ordinary course of life," it leads to an imaginary world and identity. Reading (novels) is losing oneself to reality by losing oneself to oneself.

It is precisely this oblivion and this loss which Proust shies away from in reading. His whole discussion is intended to state—with a still quite Romantic fervor (as can be seen in the recurrence of such terms as "inspiration," "creation," "genius," etc.)—that reading (and particularly the reading of novels) is a process of appropriation and not of expropriation of the self. What Proust resists and reacts against is the possibility that reading might be the devil of night who brings darkness into the daylight rather than the angel of night who brings light into the darkness.

And yet, what if in fact this were the effect produced by

reading, the seduction that literature exerts? If, through/beyond the imaginary in which reality dissolves itself, it were that annulment of the self and of the world, rooted in an "inertia of the will," in an "impossibility to wish" that for Proust is a sickness, one which reading should cure by strengthening the self? If what the reader seeks within the space of a book were not the splendor of an ego but, on the contrary, the obscuring of "every sentiment and memory," like "that gentleman who, having lived from his earliest youth with street brigands, could no longer remember his own name because he had stopped using it for such a long time"?¹⁹

2. THE SECRET

Ruskin and Proust have given a series of indications, sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent, which should now be tied together. Then we may try to define the effects of the seduction that literature exerts through reading.

Etymologically, "to seduce" means "to divert," "to lead aside." If literature seduces, therefore, it is because it diverts the reader from what is nothing other than what Ruskin had called "the ordinary course of life" and Freud, more synthetically, "reality." Reading is where this leading aside, this abduction takes place. Ruskin tells us so in his image of the mine, as does Proust not only in his insistence on solitude but in his list of places for reading: the shade of a tree in a deserted field, an empty room, the bedroom at night. . . . These are experiences we have all had and we could add an infinity of others: for example, that during childhood we often read secretly, that equally often we are possessive about what we read: we do not like to talk about it, we hate to be caught in the act of reading, etc. Reading is an "asocial" experience (Barthes), "claustrophilic" (a term recently proposed by Elvio Fachinelli),²⁰ which segregates us from the world and from other people—but also, we have begun to see, from ourselves. In a word, we might say that it is a movement toward *secrecy*, toward the space of a secret.

Such a movement would seem to be governed by two tendencies which I will call *imaginary appropriation of the self and the world* and *expropriation of the self and the world*.

Starting from the first, I will rather liberally make use of two different theories: Lacan's famous study of the mirror stage, and some other psychoanalytic studies on secrecy and secrets which have appeared relatively recently.²¹

Given that all psychoanalysts who have studied the secret (understood as the act of hiding [oneself in] something, not as *what* is hidden) agree in considering it an indispensable element in the mental constitution and organization of the subject, how do they represent it? The answer is simple: by comparing it to a treasure. Hiding is storing treasures. But what does one hide, and why?

One hides above all, obviously, beloved objects which the subject stores as treasures to preserve them from appropriation by others, from the wear and tear of time, from loss in everyday life. It may be a gift, a letter, any very ordinary material object; or it may be a thought, a memory, an image, which becomes invisible by not speaking about it, not communicating it. But at the same time what the subject hides and treasures is a part of the self, the part bound to those beloved objects and which the subject feels as his own true identity, his own true self.²²

As for why one hides oneself by hiding something, an English psychoanalyst (M. Masud R. Khan) has said that the subject "absents himself" (A. Green) in the secret not only to preserve his own self from a traumatic reality, but to keep it "suspended." The "secret('s) space," in other words, is a "potential space" (Winnicott) where the subject preserves those nuclei of mental experiences which he does not yet have the capacity to actualize in the real world: he keeps them in the hope of being able to actualize them one day when he will (re-)emerge as a complete person in the world of (other) men. The secret, like a casket, guards the subject's identity in a utopian expectation of being able to give back to the sociality of real life.²³

Let us compare what we have just seen with reading as it was presented, indeed recommended, by Ruskin and, above all, Proust. The correspondences are immediately clear. Precisely since it is solitary (self-hiding), reading allows the subject to go down into those "deep regions of the self" where "the true life of the spirit begins"²⁴: where, by thinking "by himself," he can find and develop those forces which will make him an individual *à part entière*: a "creator," says Proust.²⁵ For Proust too, then, the "secret('s) space" is a potential space: by absenting himself in that "suspended animation"²⁶ which is reading, the subject preserves and indeed matures his own virtualities. To read is to be born, or rather to be continually reborn. By segregating the ego, reading reconstitutes it again each time *other* than what it was. (Obviously, Ruskin's metaphor of the gold and the mine says nothing different from this.)

However, this conclusion overlooks, in my opinion, an essential aspect of the secret. The process of segregation is a process of

transformation into fantasies. What is hidden (treasured) is transformed into something (a treasure) imaginary. Any common phenomenology can confirm it. The more the beloved object is made and kept secret, the more it will lose its real characteristics to take on others which are purely imaginary. At the same time, that part of the self which the subject hides with the beloved object becomes imaginary too. If it is his true identity, his true ego, this identity and this ego are nothing more than a fantasy. *Un leurre*, Lacan would say.

The imaginary, in fact—as Lacan himself teaches—is *voué au leurre*: to illusion and deceit (and therefore to disillusion and undeceive). We can think back to one of the most frequently recurring themes in fairy-tales: a safe is opened, and instead of gold coins, stones or pieces of coal are found; a locket is opened, and instead of the lock of hair, a little heap of dust is found. Now, what else can this mean except that the treasure was imaginary—and that there is no way of converting the imaginary into the real? This is not all: the subject who discovers such a thing often goes mad. After having been closed inside the safe or the locket, his ego is dissolved when these are opened, finding himself without an ego. Again, there is no passage from the imaginary to the real. Segregation is irreversible. What has been closed in the “potential space” of the secret can never come out of it to be actualized in the real world. The utopia of the imaginary is truly a *u*-topia: something which can dwell nowhere but can only rest on itself: a pure and absolute fantasy.

If the angel of reading, as Proust said, opens the gates of the celestial garden, it must be the garden of the imaginary; and if the reader's ego lives in it, this same ego is by now no more than an imaginary ego. As Barthes wrote, “the subject-reader is a subject entirely transferred into the register of the Imaginary.”²⁷ And it is Proust himself who confirms for us that this register is not convertible, reversible into the register of the Real: because that identity which he found in the silence and the solitude of reading is not his own identity, but Marcel's, such as will be presented in the *Recherche*. One passes from reading to writing, from one imaginary setting to another, without ever being able to come out and to return to the “world outside.”

It is here, then, that Lacan's theory of the mirror stage can help us. The essential point of this theory is well-known: between the age of six and eighteen months, when he is still in a state of motor unco-ordination and functional fragmentation, the child who is placed in front of a mirror perceives himself as a whole form

(*Gestalt*). That is, he perceives in the image the mirror sends him and in which he recognizes himself, that corporal unity, that functional synthesis which he does not actually have but which, through such means, he is able to anticipate imaginatively. The child identifies himself with his mirror-image, and this comes to constitute for him the primordial form of what will one day be his "function as subject," the unity and the permanence of his ego (*je*). But such an identification is also, immediately, an alienation. The figure which is shown in the mirror is *other* than the child, so that by identifying himself with that, he identifies with the *other* of himself. At the same time, then, that the image provides the child with the symbolic matrix of subjectivity, it provides him with it as an object (*moi*) placed "in a fictional direction": an "Ideal-I" ("ideal," like that corporal unity which the child in his real "poverty" lacks) which constitutes an imaginary goal toward which the subject will never cease to stretch out, alienating himself in it.²⁸

This experience of the mirror is exactly the same as the experience of reading. "Populated solitude," Proust called it: populated by figures, by images. Things, people, places, feelings, actions . . . the whole of reality, reflected in the pages of a book, of books, is exhibited like a spectacle before the reader's eyes. And when the reader sees it, he recognizes it, that is, he identifies with it and alienates himself in it at the same time. I need not mention the identification processes which occur in reading. Whatever their form, it is always a projection of the subject who is reading into an "Ideal-I" which is the pole around which the work's entire imaginary universe is arranged. The child's recognition of himself in his mirror-image, writes Lacan,

immediately rebounds [. . .] in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates—the child's own body, and the persons and things around him.²⁹

By taking possession of himself imaginatively, the child takes possession imaginatively of the world (his world). But as this world is also *other* than the real world, the child will alienate himself in it in the same way as he alienated in the *other* ego which the mirror sends back to him. The same thing happens with the reader: by coinciding with the imaginary ego provided by the text, he makes his world coincide with this equally imaginary world of the text. The pleasure of reading (which is something different from Barthes's "pleasure of the text") is therefore the "jubilation" of

Lacan's child in front of the mirror: it is the jubilation—or the "euphoria" (Barthes)—of the transfer to an ego and an imaginary world which leads the subject to believe that at last he possesses himself and reality. (Jubilation and euphoria in which psychoanalysts will easily trace the dream of infantile omnipotence and its narcissism.)

Ruskin, therefore, was right: segregation in the mine is aimed at finding gold: the gold of the imaginary. But precisely because it is so it cannot be carried out of the mine: it is a treasure only as long as it stays in the mine. I repeat, there is no exit from the imaginary.

But here we must ask: is it necessarily true that we want to come out? Further still: is it really the gold we are looking for when we go into the mine? Or is it that we go in only in order not to come out again? Is not the gold only the lure which draws us into the mine, the alibi which we give ourselves for going in, at the most the "secondary gain" (Freud) which we obtain from it—whereas deep down what we are seeking is something else? In short, is not the reader Rosso Malpelo rather than Ali Baba?*

Let us go back to the secret. The psychoanalysts who have studied it are ready to recognize that it is ambivalent: it can be a treasure, but it can also be a guilt feeling or a disgrace. Curiously enough, however, after having mentioned this, they go on to speak of it always and only as a treasure, never as a guilt feeling or a disgrace.

Now, it is clear that this second value of the secret puts us in a completely different perspective. A guilt feeling or a disgrace is hidden not to be treasured but to be destroyed. We keep quiet about it, we make it invisible not because we want to preserve it but because we want to make it disappear. Nor do we wish it to remain out of sight only from other people, but also from ourselves. It should no longer exist *even* for us, even as a memory or an image. This is to say that we do not want to remember it, but to forget it. (The fact that guilt or disgrace remains as an indelible memory which keeps coming back to torment the subject is something against which he will never stop struggling.) This means, however, that it is the subject himself who wishes to forget *himself*. Far from guarding a part of himself in the secret, he rubs out this part, he suppresses it. "He carried his secret with him to the grave" is a

*Rosso Malpelo is the main character of the homonymous short story by G. Verga, published in the volume *Vita dei campi* (1880). Rosso never returns from his exploration of the cave. [Tr.]

common expression: it is like saying that the secret was *already* the grave in which the subject had buried himself.

Now, this annulment of the self is the second and more profound goal of reading. More profound, I say, than the goal of the imaginary. Psychoanalysts draw an accurate distinction between "secret" and "fantasy." The fantasy is the signifier of a signified which remains unsaid. In every subject, fantasy production is a series of mobile and changing scenes which refer to an "other scene"—the secret—which, immobile and always identical to itself, remains invisible. Masks of a face which they *hide*. If the secret is an unspoken word, no other word can take its place, can translate it—and by translating, reveal the secret. On the contrary, every (other) word, every image or fantasy cannot help but refer to the secret and annul itself in it—just as masks are annulled in the face which gives the lie to them.³⁰

The relationship between fantasy and secret is the relationship which runs between the two tendencies and goals of reading. If the segregation from the real is supposed to achieve an imaginary appropriation of the self and of the world, what the subject is looking for—or rather, what he is seduced by—through/*beyond* such appropriation is the expropriation of the self and of the world. Not the identification with an imaginary ego, but the effacement of the ego. Beyond the fantasies lies the secret. What seduces us in literature—in the etymological sense of the word, what diverts us from ourselves—is the promise of that loss. The imaginary is only a lure and a transition. The gold which attracts us into the mine is the "call" (*leurre*) which induces us to go in; but what we are really looking for, what we have been seduced by, is the mine itself. As the Narcissus myth illustrates so exemplarily: because what he really desired, beneath the image of himself which was drawn on the surface of the water (his imaginary ego), was the bottom of the pool. The imaginary is the call of death.

Proust was right, then, when, fearing reading, he said that it is scored by a dangerous "principle of death" which wishes and looks for "stillness." In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud introduced a new principle called the "Nirvana principle," which was borrowed from an English psychoanalyst and, earlier, obviously, from Schopenhauer. With it, Freud was referring to the tendency of the psyche "to reduce, [. . .] to eliminate the internal tension caused by stimuli."³¹ In this text, Freud identified the Nirvana principle with the pleasure principle itself, in that he considered that pleasure could not be anything other than the opposite of tension. Four years later, in his essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism," he would seem to have changed this

view, contrasting the pleasure principle, representative of the libido, to the Nirvana principle, defined as "entirely in the service of the death instincts, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state" and whose function it is to preserve the organism from "the demands of the life instincts."³²

It is precisely under the sign of stillness and Nirvana—and of that death instinct of which they are, in Freudian terms, the representatives, or, in Proustian terms, the angels—that the second goal of reading lies. If the pleasure which it brings is, above all, the jubilation of a subject who transfers himself—and possesses himself—in an imaginary ego and world, that pleasure, on a deeper level, is the happiness of a drift in which the subject flows, losing himself beyond the images themselves. Much has been said in recent years about an eroticism in reading. I would instead speak of it as an annulment of eros, of everything that can lead us back to exaltation and to life.³³ Behind the mirror of the images, dissolving the fantasies of the desire to which these images gave form, reading attracts us and urges us toward that place where there is nothing more to desire because there is quite literally nothing. Or rather, only Freud's "inorganic state." Or rather, the rock in Ruskin's mine: rock with no gold left: mine which has closed in on itself.

3. SEDUCTION

If this is the ultimate goal of reading, it seems reasonable now to ask ourselves what textual strategies activate it. It is clear that the discussion about reading must at some stage double into a discussion about the text. (The same way as in Barthes the distinction between the pleasure of the text and the enjoyment of the text corresponds to the distinction between text for pleasure and text for enjoyment.) This will allow a further clarification of the concept of (literary) seduction: this time *a parte obiecti*. And since this concept was introduced by Baudrillard, we must refer to him.

Baudrillard uses two definitions of seduction alternately and not very precisely. On the one hand, he defines as seductive any "intransitive" surface which does not refer to any depth below it, but instead withholds the eye in itself and makes it circulate among its forms (for example, make-up, fashion, games, ceremony, etc.). If a reference is made to something *other* than the appearance, it is only a *simulation* produced by the appearance itself—as in the *trompe-l'oeil* (which is Baudrillard's standard example), where three-dimensionality is simulated by two dimensions.

On the other hand, however, Baudrillard states that the seductive mechanism "retracts something from the order of the visible,"³⁴ it produces—or rather, it bases itself upon an "eclipse of presence."³⁵ The surface includes the "shadow" areas—invisible, unspoken—and these are the priming areas for seduction. Baudrillard then goes to great length to deny that the "shadow" which is drawn on the surface corresponds to a "back" of that surface:³⁶ the appearance is not perforated but simply obscured, and the fact that the "shadow" is mistaken for a "back" is only the deceit (*leurre*) which seduction consists of (as the *trompe-l'oeil* example shows).

I do not intend to discuss this theory here. I cannot help pointing out, however, that I find it more suggestive than convincing—a verbal artifice of the same tenor as the "superficial abyss" formula which Baudrillard adores.³⁷ Not only does he continually presuppose that very depth he denies when he is explaining the seduction mechanism,³⁸ but in all the examples he offers (the only exception being perhaps the *trompe-l'oeil*) this depth does play a part. To prove this, we need only look at erotic seduction (model for every other form of seduction): Baudrillard goes to great length to separate it from sexuality—from desire and enjoyment—whereas in actual fact it consists of and exists only in reference to that sexuality. That is, in the reference to something which is *other* than it and lies *behind* it.³⁹

I would consider important, instead, the emphasis placed on the shadow, on the invisible and the unsaid. It is not what is offered to the eye which is seductive, but what is removed from it. As Barthes said (without, however, using this term), a striptease is not seductive but the unbuttoning of a blouse is.⁴⁰ What is seductive is that which cannot be perceived and deciphered—within a context of perceptibility and decipherability.⁴¹ "Seduction," writes Baudrillard, "is always what outrages the visible universe [. . .] in order to overturn it into a secret; what seduces is something which contains a great secret."⁴² (I would note, by the way, that the dimension of depth comes out again in these very words. It may well be, in fact—as Baudrillard adds immediately after—that what is seductive is "what contains" the secret and not "what is hidden"; but "what contains" the secret is seductive insofar as it refers to "what is hidden" as to something *other* than itself.)

If this is seduction, it must be carefully distinguished from fascination. The contradictoriness of Baudrillard's theory derives from his having confused the two concepts.⁴³ Though I don't have the time (nor indeed would it be the appropriate place) to attempt to elaborate on this, I will simply point out that everything Baudrillard writes about appearance pertains to fascination, not to seduc-

tion. Fascination is the abrupt halt before an impenetrable surface. It is the experience of pure, absolute visibility, the experience of a flat shape devoid of all depth. What is fascinating, then, is everything which is *pro-duced* in the exact sense in which Baudrillard uses the term: "brought to visibility."⁴⁴ Everything which does *not* contain a secret.

Seduction, on the contrary, begins precisely where the secret begins. Where the surface of the visible, of the said, bends over and sinks into a whirlpool which sucks in the subject (spectator or reader) toward something which is—and must *remain*—hidden. Baudrillard is perfectly correct in saying that the true secret is the one which *remains* such, which (since it is different from the enigma) cannot or must not ever be revealed.⁴⁵ But precisely for this reason it seduces: because it makes the subject experience a feeling of vertigo which projects him outside of himself.

It is clear that we are not far from the discussion on reading already developed. The two goals of the imaginary appropriation of the self and of the world and of their expropriation correspond, in fact, to the experiences of fascination and seduction—two experiences which are both textual strategies. The literary text *fascinates* in that it offers the reader a surface of shapes, of figures over which his eyes can run (and I need not add that the more the surface of the text is perfected, the more it will fascinate, as in the well-known example of entertainment literature). And since fascination is always an identification (-alienation) in the image displayed, the reader will appropriate to himself what the surface of the text shows him. The text, on the other hand, *seduces* to the extent that, by referring the reader toward "something" which it does *not* show him, toward a sense which is always removed from him, it attracts him into a void which expropriates him of his knowledge and of his very identity.

I foresee the objection that this void, the obscure depth of the text, is precisely what gives rise to analysis and interpretation, which are anything but an expropriation of the subject. But I would reply that with analysis and interpretation we are already at a different level, subsequent to that reading. Analysis and interpretation are indeed the *re-affirmation* of the ego of the reader, who has become critic, *against* the seductive effect produced in him by the text and consisting, I repeat, of an eclipse of the ego—as the page from Ruskin which I quoted at the beginning illustrates so well. When, faced with what he called the "cruel reticence" of an author, Ruskin confessed to "not understanding," he was registering perfectly (even if, certainly, involuntarily) the seductiveness that the author had exerted on him. A bewilderment—to adapt

Barthes's words to Ruskin⁴⁶—which had unsettled his historical, cultural and psychological assumptions, the consistency of his taste and values, upsetting not only his knowledge but his very relationship with language. The experience, in short, of a loss of self.

Someone may still object that the sensation of vertigo when faced with the secret to which the text refers is something different from the instance of drift which I mentioned above with reference to reading. It seems to me, instead, that, as erotic seduction is the activation of a desire in the subject who is seduced, so the secret contained in the text activates in the reader precisely that tendency to annul himself of which I have spoken and without which, perhaps, he would not even read.

I would like to add one last thing. To say that the most seductive texts are those which most include a layer of things left unsaid undoubtedly sounds obvious today. But it is something obvious—like all the emphasis on analysis and interpretation which accompanies it—which remains inside that myth (or ideology) of production so well illustrated, as far as sexuality is concerned, by Foucault in *La volonté de savoir* and against which Baudrillard himself has written so effectively. According to this myth (or ideology), literature is born from a *wish to say all*. One writes *in order to say everything*. And if one does not say it, it is because one is not able, because something prevents communication. Reticence, then, is only the obstruction of the word, the unsaid, the interdiction of something which asks only to be said, the secret, the effect of a censorship (internal or external). . . . Indeed, it is not even correct that one cannot say (almost) everything; one can—obliquely, through symbols and enigmas, through tropes and lapsus—which analysis and interpretation will then undertake to solve, to translate into direct language, to communicate, using an inquisitorial procedure for which the psychoanalysts who have studied the secret have rightly used the expression “sublimated sadism.”⁴⁷ Nothing must remain unspoken and hidden, every dark corner must be lit, one must confess the unconfessed (or have it confessed), display the repressed, denounce the ignored. . . . Hiding is an anathema, and silence is a curse.

And yet, what if we were to begin looking at literature (also) from the opposite point of view? In a recent book, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979), Frank Kermode took as his starting point the “scandalous” verses of the Gospel of Saint Mark (4:11-12) (verses which Ruskin certainly had in mind when he wrote the passage quoted above) in which Jesus says that he speaks in parables in order that

those who "are without" may see but not perceive, hear but not understand, "lest at any time they should be converted and their sins should be forgiven them." *In order that* they should *not* perceive and understand, *in order that nothing* should be communicated to them! Kermode's book then carried on in a different direction and did not really center on this tendency toward secrecy and silence. But it is a central feature in the author who is quoted perhaps more than any other in that book: Henry James. Several of James's stories are built around a secret: not around a variety or a depth of meaning such as we find in all the great authors, but around something which is intentionally *not* said and must *not* be known—a kind of "black hole" around which the constellation of the text rotates. They are stories which can mainly be defined as meta-narratives, since they dramatize the act and the status of writing, but which we could also define as "meta-seductive," since what they present is precisely the effect of seduction which literature, through the secret it contains, exercises over the reader. Predictably enough, critics have unleashed their "will to know" on these stories: it was compulsory to reveal the secret, to make the silence speak—where what James was evoking was the exact opposite: the function that hiding and keeping silent have for literature, and without which literature would not even exist, because then it would be (as Ruskin had said) a "talking thing" and not a "written thing."

Communication in the bosom of silence is what Proust called reading. Why not say, instead, that literature is silence in the bosom of communication? Not the language of silence, but silence *in* language (that is, in the only place where it is possible). Literature's appeal lies in this rejection of communication and display. Psychoanalysts will see in it the protection of the subject's identity. Why not see, rather, the desire for its disappearance? So much has been said (*spoken*, as always) of the liberating function of literature. . . . Why not suppose, at least, that if it liberates us from something, it is from ourselves?

EPILOGUE

This is, in my opinion—but I should really say, in *my experience*—the heart of the literary experience. The rest comes after—and the "rest" is criticism, which begins with "knowing how to read," with Barthes's "pleasure of the text,"⁴⁸ and then continues with hermeneutics and with historico-cultural reconstructions. At these various levels, criticism is always a *compromise*

(in the sense in which Freud spoke of "compromise-formations") between our ego and the world we go on living in, on the one hand, and the experience of literature in the process of reading, on the other. Criticism is a return of the ego to itself, which submits to its own powers of recognition and control that text which, for a moment, had made it come out of itself. It is a defensive strategy against the seductive force of literature, and as such it is regulated by the principle of reality, not of pleasure and/or death.

I hope it is clear that I say all this without any derogatory intention. Criticism is something we all do, which I myself do. It is not a futile or useless exercise, or only a job which we are paid for. Criticism gives us an awareness of the literary fact, of its historical and cultural collocation, of the functions it performs each time, of the values it produces and reproduces, of the rules which govern it. . . . But the knowledge of a fact is not the experience of it.

If I may take up the metaphor of the mine again for the last time, the critic seems to me to be like the mine engineer who, after a preliminary study of the land, digs a well and the tunnels, provides ventilation and safety systems, and if he goes into the shafts, it is only to put a prop here, a beam there, a vent somewhere else—something quite different from going alone into the darkness of the earth. And yet this going-in is what constitutes the experience of the mine.

Similarly, criticism is the drilling and the exploitation of literature, the extraction of what the "world above" defines as the gold of knowledge. But this work and its proceeds remain outside of that for which I can find no other name except, once again, the experience of literature. The critic is Rosso Malpelo who has come back among men, and has perhaps become manager of the mine. Perhaps it was impossible for him not to come back—but if he forgets "what it was like in there," if he does not use it as a constant reference point for his every choice and action, then he might as well change his job.

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Les stratégies fatales* (Grasset: Paris, 1983), p. 164.

2. The passage, which comes from the *Discours de la méthode*, is mentioned by Proust in the Preface to his translation of Ruskin's lecture (see below, note 10).

3. The expression is used by Proust in the Preface to *La Bible d'Amiens* (1904).

4. Platonically, Ruskin sees Truth as a pure idea beyond language.

5. This could be a definition of Ruskin's own lecture!

6. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (Dent: London, 1970), pp. 7-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

8. Not even Proust, in a note on this passage (p. 114 of the edition quoted below, note 10) goes further than Ruskin. Talking of the "kind of haze which surrounds the splendour of good books," he denies that it is a device used by the author to make the work difficult; on the contrary, it is a "natural haze" which is dictated to the author by a "natural necessity" unrelated to any "reasoning in which he might say 'I'" ("The writer is but the place where those thoughts are formed which propose themselves every moment, which fabricate and alter the necessary and unique form in which they will be embodied"). But it is clear that the question simply repeats itself: why is it that what makes a book "good," "splendid," is precisely that which is "unsaid and which composes its noble atmosphere of silence, that marvellous enamel which shines with the sacrifice of everything which has not been said"?

9. Einaudi: Torino, 1982.

10. This translation, which has not been reprinted, exists in an Italian edition to which I shall refer in the following pages: Marcel Proust, *Commento a "Sesamo e i gigli" di John Ruskin*, ed. B. Piqué (Editoriale Nuova: Milano, 1982). For the Preface only, I shall also indicate in brackets the page number of the Pléiade edition: Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve. Précédé de Pastiches et Mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*, édition établie par P. Clarac avec la collaboration d'Y. Sandre (Gallimard: Paris, 1971).

11. Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 309.

12. Proust, *Commento*, p. 20 [p. 174].

13. "Our way of communicating with people involves a dispersion of the active forces of the soul which, on the contrary, that marvellous miracle of reading, which is communication in the bosom of solitude, concentrates and exalts. When one reads, one receives another thought, and yet one is alone, in the full fervour of the mind, in full inspiration, in full personal activity: one receives the ideas of another person, in spirit, that is to say, with truth; one can therefore be united with these ideas, one is that other person, and yet one's own ego is simply developed with greater variety than if one were thinking alone, one is urged by others to follow the right path." (Ibid., pp. 104-05.)

14. "A man can inspire us only if we listen to him in solitude, that is to say, if we read him, but he must in his turn have been inspired. Solitude allows us only to put ourselves in the state in which he himself was, a state which could not occur if the book was a spoken book; when one is speaking, one can neither read nor write." (Ibid., pp. 105-06.)

15. If this is true, however, we might perhaps conclude that Proust essentially agreed with Ruskin's definition of reading as conversation. If conversation is a dual relationship between someone who speaks and someone who *answers*, rather than someone who simply listens in silence, then precisely that strengthening of the ego through reading is what makes it possible for the reader to *talk* with the author.

16. Proust, *Commento*, pp. 24-28 [pp. 178-83].

17. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, p. 65. (Note that Ruskin uses "novel" and "romance" synonymously here.)

18. While that kind of reading can be educational for men, since they are capable of seeing there "treatises on moral anatomy and chemistry" and therefore of extracting the gold of wisdom.

19. Proust, *Commento*, pp. 24-25 [pp. 178-79].

20. Elvio Fachinelli, *Claustrofobia* (Adelphi: Milano, 1983), pp. 63-64 in particular.

21. See No. 14, 1976, of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, "Du secret."

22. Cf. Victor N. Smirnoff, "Le squelette dans la placard," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, No. 14, 1976, pp. 40-41.

23. M. Masud R. Khan, "L'espace du secret," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, No. 9, 1974, pp. 47 and 53. Cf. also André Green, "Le double et l'absent," *Critique*, No. 312, 1973.

24. Proust, *Commento*, p. 25 [p. 179].
25. On the "creative" function of thinking in secret, see Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, "Le droit au secret: condition pour pouvoir penser," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, No. 14, 1976.
26. Khan, "L'espace du secret," p. 53.
27. Roland Barthes and Antoine Compagnon, "Lettura," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Einaudi: Torino, 1977-1985), vol. 8, p. 188.
28. Jacques Lacan, "Le stade du miroir," in *Ecrits* (Seuil: Paris, 1966), pp. 93-101. Cf. also "L'agressivité en psychanalyse," *Ecrits*, pp. 112-13.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 93. I quote from Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (Norton: New York, 1977), p. 1.
30. Cf. Smirnoff, "Le squelette dans le placard," pp. 31 and 34.
31. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, S.E., vol. 18, pp. 55-56.
32. Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," S.E., vol. 19, p. 160. I am not sure that Freud was not right in 1920. Since the death instinct aims to "reduce to zero" mental tensions, it is a source of pleasure. Certainly, it is a different pleasure from that of the life instinct, but not less so for that. After all, "stillness" does not offer less happiness than "exaltation"—and perhaps it offers even *more*.
33. Although agreeing with what Barthes has written on the "loss of the ego" which accompanies the "enjoyment of the text" (distinct from the "pleasure of the text"), such enjoyment still seems to me too vital, too closely linked to orgasmic *dépense* and to Bataille's erotisation of death—in a word, not Schopenhauerian enough.
34. Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Galilée: Paris, 1979), p. 54.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
38. As when he writes, for example, that seduction "removes the sense from speech and diverts speech from the truth" (*ibid.*, p. 77). Where it is clear that "sense" and "truth" must be presupposed for seduction to be able to remove them and divert speech from them.
39. Certainly, sexuality is the *end* of seduction, which continues only as long as enjoyment is *postponed*. The time of seduction is this delay, this interval which defers sexuality. But seduction is constitutively directed toward sexuality: its end is also its aim.
40. Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Seuil: Paris, 1973), p. 19. Cf. also Baudrillard, *De la séduction*, p. 52 (*veiled* nudity is seductive).
41. Jean Baudrillard, interview with R. Maggiori, *la Repubblica*, 5-15-1980.
42. Jean Baudrillard, "Il destino della seduzione," in Paolo Meneghetti—Stefano Trombini (eds.), *Ipotesi di seduzione* (Cappelli: Bologna, 1981), p. 85.
43. Baudrillard sometimes seems to distinguish fascination from seduction (cf. for example *De la séduction*, p. 173, and *Simulacres et simulation* [Galilée: Paris, 1981], p. 231). But more often he considers them identical, or rather he moves from one to the other (cf. for example *De la séduction*, pp. 108 and 236).
44. Baudrillard, *De la séduction*, p. 54.
45. Baudrillard, "Il destino della seduzione," p. 86.
46. Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, pp. 25-26.
47. Smirnoff, "Le squelette dans le placard," pp. 39-41.
48. More than the pleasure of reading (of literature), the "pleasure of the text" is the *pleasure of criticism*. Insofar as it lies within the self-gratification of the reader, who, roaming among the signs of the text, takes pleasure in their different combinations and enjoys spinning them around in the kaleidoscope of his intelligence, it must be defined as an erotisation of the *critical* "knowing how to read." As such, the pleasure of the text is a narcissistic pleasure which neutralizes the effect of seduction produced by literature—in the same way as the pleasure of make-up and of fashion is a neutralisation of erotic pleasure.