

le marine acque. E con setoluto e nero dosso, a guisa di montagna, quelle vincere e sopraffare!

And many times were you seen among the waves of the great swollen ocean, and with stately and grave bearing going swirling in the sea waters. And with your black and bristly back, looming like a mountain, defeating and overwhelming them!

But the word *volteggiare* seems to him to have lessened the impression of grandeur and majesty that he wants to evoke. So he chooses the verb *solcare* (to furrow) and alters the whole construction of the passage, giving it compactness and rhythm with sure literary judgment:

O quante volte fusti tu veduto in fra l'onde del gonfiato e grande oceano, a guisa di montagna quelle vincere e sopraffare, e col setoluto e nero dosso solcare le marine acque, e con superbo e grave andamento!

O how many times were you seen among the waves of the great swollen ocean, looming like a mountain, defeating and overwhelming them, and with your black and bristly back furrowing the sea waters, and with stately and grave bearing!

His pursuit of the apparition, which is presented almost as a symbol of the solemn force of nature, gives us an inkling of how Leonardo's imagination worked. I leave you this image at the very end of my talk so that you may carry it in your memories as long as possible, in all its transparency and its mystery.

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## VISIBILITY

There is a line in Dante (*Purgatorio* XVII.25) that reads: "Poi piovette dentro a l'alta fantasia" (Then rained down into the high fantasy . . .). I will start out this evening with an assertion: fantasy is a place where it rains.

Let us look at the context in which we find this line of the *Purgatorio*. We are in the circle of the Wrathful, and Dante is meditating on images that form directly in his mind, depicting classical and biblical examples of wrath chastised. He realizes that these images rain down from the heavens—that is, God sends them to him.

In the various circles of Purgatory, besides the details of the landscape and the vault of the heavens, and in addition to his encounters with the souls of repentant sinners and with supernatural beings, Dante is presented with scenes that act as quotations or representations of examples of sins and virtues, at first as bas-reliefs that appear to move and to speak, then as visions projected before his eyes, then as voices reaching his ear, and finally as purely mental images. In a word, these visions turn progressively more inward, as if Dante realized that it is useless at every circle to invent a new form of metarepresentation, and that it is better to place the visions directly in the mind without making them pass through the senses.

But before this it is necessary to define what the imagination is, and this Dante does in two *terzinas* (XVII.13–18):

O imaginativa che ne rube  
 talvolta sì di fuor, ch'om non s'accorge  
 perché dintorno suonin mille tube,  
 chi move te, se 'l senso non ti porge?  
 Moveti lume che nel ciel s'informa  
 per sé o per voler che giù lo scorge.

It goes without saying that we are here concerned with “high fantasy”: that is, with the loftier part of the imagination as distinct from the corporeal imagination, such as is revealed in the chaos of dreams. With this point in mind, let us try to follow Dante’s reasoning, which faithfully reproduces that of the philosophy of his time. I will paraphrase: O imagination, you who have the power to impose yourself on our faculties and our wills, stealing us away from the outer world and carrying us off into an inner one, so that even if a thousand trumpets were to sound we would not hear them, what is the source of the visual messages that you receive, if they are not formed from sensations deposited in the memory? “Moveti lume che nel ciel s’informa” (You are moved by a light that is formed in heaven): according to Dante—and also Thomas Aquinas—there is a kind of luminous source in the skies that transmits ideal images, which are formed either according to the intrinsic logic of the imaginary world (“per sé”) or according to the will of God: “o per voler che giù lo scorge” (or by a will that guides it downward).

Dante speaks of the visions presented to him (that is, to Dante the actor in the poem) almost as if they were film projections or television images seen on a screen that is quite separate from the objective reality of his journey beyond the earth. But for Dante the poet as well, the entire journey of Dante the actor is of the same nature as these visions. The poet has to imagine visually both what his actor sees and what he thinks he sees, what he

dreams, what he remembers, what he sees represented, or what is told to him, just as he has to imagine the visual content of the metaphors he uses to facilitate this process of visual evocation. What Dante is attempting to define, therefore, is the role of the imagination in the *Commedia*, in particular the visual part of his fantasy, which precedes or is simultaneous with verbal imagination.

We may distinguish between two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression. The first process is the one that normally occurs when we read. For example, we read a scene in a novel or the report of some event in a newspaper and, according to the greater or lesser effectiveness of the text, we are brought to witness the scene as if it were taking place before our eyes, or at least to witness certain fragments or details of the scene that are singled out.

In the cinema the image we see on the screen has also passed through the stage of a written text, has then been “visualized” in the mind of the director, then physically reconstructed on the set, and finally fixed in the frames of the film itself. A film is therefore the outcome of a succession of phases, both material and otherwise, in the course of which the images acquire form. During this process, the “mental cinema” of the imagination has a function no less important than that of the actual creation of the sequences as they will be recorded by the camera and then put together on the moviola. This mental cinema is always at work in each one of us, and it always has been, even before the invention of the cinema. Nor does it ever stop projecting images before our mind’s eye.

It is significant that great importance is given to the visual imagination in Ignatius of Loyola’s *Ejercicios espirituales* (Spiritual

Exercises). At the beginning of his manual, Loyola prescribes the “composición viendo el lugar” (visual composition of the place) in terms that might be instructions for the mise-en-scène of a theatrical performance: “en la contemplación o meditación visible, así como contemplar a Christo nuestro Señor, el qual es visible, la composición será ver con la vista de la imaginación el lugar corpóreo, donde se halla la cosa que quiero contemplar. Digo el lugar corpóreo, así como un templo o monte, donde se halla Jesu Christo o Nuestra Señora,” (in visual contemplation or meditation, especially in the contemplation of Christ our Lord insofar as he is visible, this composition will consist in seeing from the view of the imagination the physical place where the thing I wish to contemplate is to be found. I say the physical place, as for example a temple or a hill where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is). Loyola quickly hastens to make it clear that the contemplation of our own sins must not be visual, or else—if I have understood rightly—we must make use of visual imagination of a metaphorical sort (the soul imprisoned in the corruptible body).

Further on, in the first day of the second week, the spiritual exercise opens with a vast visionary panorama and with spectacular crowd scenes:

*1° puncto.* El primer puncto es ver las personas, las unas y las otras; y primero las de la haz de la tierra, en tanta diversidad, así en trajes como en gestos, unos blancos y otros negros, unos en paz y otros en guerra, unos llorando y otros riendo, unos sanos, otros enfermos, unos nasciendo y otros muriendo, etc.

*2°:* ver y considerar las tres personas divinas, como en el su solio real o throno de la su divina majestad, cómo miran toda la haz y redondez de la tierra y todas las gentes en tanta ceguedad, y cómo mueren y descenden al infierno.

*1st point.* The first point is to see people, of this and that kind; and first of all those on the face of the earth in all their variety of garments and gestures, some white and others black, some in peace and some at war, some weeping and others laughing, some healthy and others sick, some being born and others dying, etc.

*2nd:* to see and to consider the three divine persons as on the regal seat or throne of their divine majesty, how they look down on the whole face and rotundity of the earth and all the people who are in such blindness, and how they die and descend to hell.

The idea that the God of Moses does not tolerate being represented in visual images does not ever seem to have occurred to Ignatius of Loyola. On the contrary, one might say that he claims for each and every Christian the grandiose visionary gifts of Dante or Michelangelo—without even the restraint that Dante seems obliged to impose on his own visual imagination when face to face with the celestial visions of Paradise.

In Loyola’s spiritual exercise for the following day (second meditation), the person meditating has to put himself into the scene and assume the role of an actor in the imaginary action:

El primer puncto es ver las personas, es a saber, ver a Nuestra Señora y a Joseph y a la ancila y al niño Jesús, después de ser nascido, haciéndome yo un pobrecito y esclavito indigno, mirándolos, contemplándolos y serviéndolos en sus necessidades, como si presente me hallase, con todo acatamiento y reverencia possible; y después reflectir en mí mismo para sacar algún provecho.

The first point is to see the people concerned, that is, to see Our Lady and Joseph and the handmaiden and the Child Jesus newly born, making myself into a poor wretch,

a base slave, gazing on them, contemplating them and serving their needs, as if I were present there, with all possible devotion and reverence; and thereafter to reflect upon myself, in order to obtain some profit.

Certainly Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation possessed a fundamental vehicle, in its ability to use visual communication: through the emotional stimuli of sacred art, the believer was supposed to grasp the meaning of the verbal teachings of the Church. But it was always a matter of starting from a given image, one proposed by the Church itself and not “imagined” by the believer. What I think distinguishes Loyola’s procedure, even with regard to the forms of devotion of his own time, is the shift from the word to the visual image as a way of attaining knowledge of the most profound meaning. Here too the point of departure and the point of arrival are already established, but in the middle there opens up a field of infinite possibilities in the application of the individual imagination, in how one depicts characters, places, and scenes in motion. The believer is called upon personally to paint frescoes crowded with figures on the walls of his mind, starting out from the stimuli that his visual imagination succeeds in extracting from a theological proposition or a laconic verse from the gospels.

Let us return to purely literary problematics and ask ourselves about the genesis of the imaginary at a time when literature no longer refers back to an authority or a tradition as its origin or goal, but aims at novelty, originality, and invention. It seems to me that in this situation the question of the priority of the visual image or verbal expression (which is rather like the problem of the chicken and the egg) tends definitely to lean toward the side of the visual imagination.

Where do they come from, these images that rain down into the fantasy? Dante, justifiably, had a high opinion of himself, to the point of having no scruples about proclaiming the direct divine inspiration of his visions. Writers closer to us in time (with the exception of those few cases of prophetic vocation) establish their contacts through earthly transmitters, such as the individual or the collective unconscious; the time regained in feelings that reemerges from time lost; or “epiphanies,” concentrations of being in a single spot or point of time. In short, it is a question of processes that, even if they do not originate in the heavens, certainly go beyond our intentions and our control, acquiring—with respect to the individual—a kind of transcendence.

Nor is it only poets and novelists who deal with this problem. A specialist on the nature of intelligence, Douglas Hofstadter, does a similar thing in his famous book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, in which the real problem is the choice between various images that have rained down into the fantasy:

Think, for instance, of a writer who is trying to convey certain ideas which to him are contained in mental images. He isn’t quite sure how those images fit together in his mind, and he experiments around, expressing things first one way and then another, and finally settles on some version. But does he know where it all came from? Only in a vague sense. Much of the source, like an iceberg, is deep underwater, unseen—and he knows that. (Vintage edition, 1980, p. 713)

But perhaps we should first to take a look at how this problem has been posed in the past. The most exhaustive, comprehensive, and clear history of the idea of imagination I have found is an essay by Jean Starobinski, “The Empire of the Imaginary” (included in the volume *La relation critique*, 1970). From the Renais-

sance magic of the neo-Platonists originates the idea of the imagination as a communication with the world soul, an idea that was to recur in romanticism and surrealism. This notion contrasts with that of the imagination as an instrument of knowledge, according to which the imagination, while following channels other than those of scientific knowledge, can coexist with the latter and even assist it, indeed be a phase the scientist needs in order to formulate his hypotheses. On the other hand, theories of the imagination as a depository of the truths of the universe can agree with a *Naturphilosophie* or with a kind of theosophical knowledge, but are incompatible with scientific knowledge—unless we divide what can be known into two parts, leaving the external world to science and isolating imaginative knowledge in the inner self of the individual. It is this second attitude that Starobinski recognizes as the method of Freudian analysis, while Jung's method, which bestows universal validity on archetypes and the collective unconscious, is linked to the idea of imagination as participation in the truth of the world.

At this point, there is a question I cannot evade: in which of the two tendencies outlined by Starobinski would I place my own idea of the imagination? To answer that question I am forced to look back at my own experience as a writer, and especially at the part that has to do with "fantastic" narrative writing. When I began to write fantastic stories, I did not yet consider theoretical questions; the only thing I knew was that there was a visual image at the source of all my stories. One of these images was a man cut in two halves, each of which went on living independently. Another example was a boy who climbs a tree and then makes his way from tree to tree without ever coming down to earth. Yet another was an empty suit of armor that moves and speaks as if someone were inside.

In devising a story, therefore, the first thing that comes to my

mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms. As soon as the image has become sufficiently clear in my mind, I set about developing it into a story; or better yet, it is the images themselves that develop their own implicit potentialities, the story they carry within them. Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. Into the organization of this material, which is no longer purely visual but also conceptual, there now enters my deliberate intent to give order and sense to the development of the story; or rather, what I do is try to establish which meanings might be compatible with the overall design I wish to give the story and which meanings are not compatible, always leaving a certain margin of possible alternatives. At the same time, the writing, the verbal product, acquires increasing importance. I would say that from the moment I start putting black on white, what really matters is the written word, first as a search for an equivalent of the visual image, then as a coherent development of the initial stylistic direction. Finally, the written word little by little comes to dominate the field. From now on it will be the writing that guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along.

In *Cosmicomics* (1965) the procedure was a little different, since the point of departure was a statement taken from the language of science; the independent play of the visual images had to arise from this conceptual statement. My aim was to show that writing using images typical of myth can grow from any soil, even from language farthest away from any visual image, as the language of science is today. Even in reading the most technical scientific book or the most abstract book of philosophy, one can come across a phrase that unexpectedly stimulates the visual imagina-

tion. We are therefore in one of those situations where the image is determined by a preexistent written text (a page or a single sentence that I come across in my reading), and from this may spring an imaginative process that might either be in the spirit of the text or go off in a direction all its own.

The first cosmicomic I wrote, "The Distance of the Moon," is possibly the most "surrealistic," in the sense that the impulse, derived from gravitational physics, leaves the door open to a dreamlike fantasy. In other cosmicomics the plot is guided by an idea more in keeping with the scientific point of departure, but always clad in a shell of imagination and feeling, and spoken by either one voice or two. In short, my procedure aims at uniting the spontaneous generation of images and the intentionality of discursive thought. Even when the opening gambit is played by the visual imagination, putting its own intrinsic logic to work, it finds itself sooner or later caught in a web where reasoning and verbal expression also impose their logic. Yet the visual solutions continue to be determining factors and sometimes unexpectedly come to decide situations that neither the conjectures of thought nor the resources of language would be capable of resolving.

One point to be cleared up about anthropomorphism in *Cosmicomics*: although science interests me just because of its efforts to escape from anthropomorphic knowledge, I am nonetheless convinced that our imagination cannot be anything *but* anthropomorphic. This is the reason for my anthropomorphic treatment of a universe in which man has never existed, and I would add that it seems extremely unlikely that man could ever exist in such a universe.

The time has come for me to answer the question I put to myself regarding Starobinski's two modes of thought: imagination as an instrument of knowledge or as identification with the world soul. Which do I choose? From what I have said, I ought

to be a determined supporter of the first tendency, since for me the story is the union of a spontaneous logic of images and a plan carried out on the basis of a rational intention. But, at the same time, I have always sought out in the imagination a means to attain a knowledge that is outside the individual, outside the subjective. It is right, then, for me to declare myself closer to the second position, that of identification with the world soul.

Still there is another definition in which I recognize myself fully, and that is the imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed, and perhaps will never exist but might have existed. In Starobinski's treatment of the subject, this comes up when he mentions Giordano Bruno. According to Bruno, the *spiritus phantasticus* is "mundus quidem et sinus inexplebilis formarum et specierum," that is, a world or a gulf, never saturable, of forms and images. So, then, I believe that to draw on this gulf of potential multiplicity is indispensable to any form of knowledge. The poet's mind, and at a few decisive moments the mind of the scientist, works according to a process of association of images that is the quickest way to link and to choose between the infinite forms of the possible and the impossible. The imagination is a kind of electronic machine that takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose, or are simply the most interesting, pleasing, or amusing.

I have yet to explain what part the *indirect* imaginary has in this gulf of the fantastic, by which I mean the images supplied by culture, whether this be mass culture or any other kind of tradition. This leads to another question: What will be the future of the individual imagination in what is usually called the "civilization of the image"? Will the power of evoking images of things that are *not there* continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images? At one time the

visual memory of an individual was limited to the heritage of his direct experiences and to a restricted repertory of images reflected in culture. The possibility of giving form to personal myths arose from the way in which the fragments of this memory came together in unexpected and evocative combinations. We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump, and it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out.

If I have included visibility in my list of values to be saved, it is to give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images. I have in mind some possible pedagogy of the imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall, on the other hand, into confused, ephemeral daydreams, but would enable the images to crystallize into a well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form, the *icastic* form.

This is of course a kind of pedagogy that we can only exercise upon ourselves, according to methods invented for the occasion and with unpredictable results. In my own early development, I was already a child of the "civilization of images," even if this was still in its infancy and a far cry from the inflations of today. Let us say that I am a product of an intermediate period, when the colored illustrations that were our childhood companions, in books, weekly magazines, and toys, were very important to us. I

think that being born during that period made a profound mark on my development. My imaginary world was first influenced by the illustrations in the *Corriere dei piccoli*, the most widely circulated weekly for children. I am speaking of my life between three and thirteen years of age, before a passion for the cinema became an absolute obsession, one that lasted all through my adolescence. In fact I believe that the really vital time was between three and six, before I learned to read.

In Italy in the twenties the *Corriere dei piccoli* used to publish the best-known American comic strips of the time: Happy Hooligan, the Katzenjammer Kids, Felix the Cat, Maggie and Jiggs, all of them rebaptized with Italian names. And there were also Italian comic strips, some of them of excellent quality, according to the graphic taste and style of the period. In Italy they had not yet started to use balloons for dialogue (these began in the thirties with the importation of Mickey Mouse). The *Corriere dei piccoli* redrew the American cartoons without balloons, replacing them with two or four rhymed lines under each cartoon. However, being unable to read, I could easily dispense with the words—the pictures were enough. I used to live with this little magazine, which my mother had begun buying and collecting even before I was born and had bound into volumes year by year. I would spend hours following the cartoons of each series from one issue to another, while in my mind I told myself the stories, interpreting the scenes in different ways—I produced variants, put together the single episodes into a story of broader scope, thought out and isolated and then connected the recurring elements in each series, mixing up one series with another, and invented new series in which the secondary characters became protagonists.

When I learned to read, the advantage I gained was minimal. Those simple-minded rhyming couplets provided no illuminating information; often they were stabs in the dark like my own, and

it was evident that the rhymster had no idea of what might have been in the balloons of the original, either because he did not understand English or because he was working from cartoons that had already been redrawn and rendered wordless. In any case, I preferred to ignore the written lines and to continue with my favorite occupation of daydreaming *within* the pictures and their sequence.

This habit undeniably caused a delay in my ability to concentrate on the written word, and I acquired the attention needed for reading only at a later stage and with effort. But reading the pictures without words was certainly a schooling in fable-making, in stylization, in the composition of the image. For example, the elegant way in which Pat O'Sullivan could draw the background in a little, square cartoon showing the black silhouette of Felix the Cat on a road that lost itself in a landscape beneath a full moon in a black sky: I think that has remained an ideal for me.

The work I did later in life, extracting stories from the mysterious figures of the tarot and interpreting the same figure in a different way each time, certainly had its roots in my obsessive porings over pages and pages of cartoons when I was a child. What I was trying to do in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (*Il castello dei destini incrociati*) is a kind of "fantastic iconology," not only with the tarot but also with great paintings. In fact I attempted to interpret the paintings of Carpaccio in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice, following the cycles of St. George and St. Jerome as if they were one story, the life of a single person, and to identify my own life with that of this George-Jerome. This fantastic iconology has become my habitual way of expressing my love of painting. I have adopted the method of telling my own stories, starting from pictures famous in the history of art or at any rate pictures that have made an impact on me.

Let us say that various elements concur in forming the visual

part of the literary imagination: direct observation of the real world, phantasmic and oneiric transfiguration, the figurative world as it is transmitted by culture at its various levels, and a process of abstraction, condensation, and interiorization of sense experience, a matter of prime importance to both the visualization and the verbalization of thought. All these features are to some extent to be found in the authors I acknowledge as models, above all at those times particularly favorable to the visual imagination—that is, in the literatures of the Renaissance, the Baroque, and the Romantic age. In an anthology that I compiled of nineteenth-century fantastic tales, I followed the visionary and spectacular vein that pulses in the stories of Hoffmann, Chamisso, Arnim, Eichendorff, Potocki, Gogol, Nerval, Gautier, Hawthorne, Poe, Dickens, Turgenev, Leskov, and continues down to Stevenson, Kipling, and Wells. And along with this I followed another, sometimes in the very same authors: the vein that makes fantastic events spring from the everyday—an inner, mental, invisible fantasy, culminating in Henry James.

Will the literature of the fantastic be possible in the twenty-first century, with the growing inflation of prefabricated images? Two paths seem to be open from now on. (1) We could recycle used images in a new context that changes their meaning. Post-modernism may be seen as the tendency to make ironic use of the stock images of the mass media, or to inject the taste for the marvelous inherited from literary tradition into narrative mechanisms that accentuate its alienation. (2) We could wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. Samuel Beckett has obtained the most extraordinary results by reducing visual and linguistic elements to a minimum, as if in a world after the end of the world.

Perhaps the first text in which all these problems are present at the same time is Balzac's *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (The Unknown



Masterpiece). And it is no coincidence that what we may call a prophetic insight came from Balzac, situated as he was at a nodal point in the history of literature, in a liminal experience, now visionary and now realistic, now both together—always apparently drawn by the forces of nature, though always very much aware of what he was doing.

*Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, on which he worked from 1831 to 1837, at first carried the subtitle of “conte fantastique,” while in the final version it figures as an “étude philosophique.” What happened in between was that—as Balzac himself puts it in another story—literature had killed the fantastic. In the first version of the story (published in a magazine in 1831), the elderly painter Frenhofer’s perfect picture, in which only a woman’s foot emerges from a chaos of color, from a shapeless fog, is both understood and admired by the artist’s two colleagues, Pourbus and Nicholas Poussin: “Combien de jouissances sur ce morceau de toile!” (How many delights on this small piece of canvas!). And even the model, who does not understand it, is nonetheless impressed in some way.

In the second version, still 1831 but in book form, a few added scraps of conversation reveal the incomprehension of Frenhofer’s colleagues. He is still an inspired mystic who lives for his ideal, but he is condemned to solitude. The final version (1837) adds many pages of technical reflection on painting, and an ending that makes it clear that Frenhofer is a madman doomed to lock himself up with his supposed masterpiece, then to burn it and commit suicide.

*Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* has often been commented on as a parable of modern art. Reading the latest of these studies, by Hubert Damisch (in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, 1984), I realized that the story can also be read as a parable of literature, about the unbridgeable gulf between linguistic expression and sense experience, and the

elusiveness of the visual imagination. Balzac’s first version contains a definition of the fantastic as indefinable: “Pour toutes ces singularités, l’idiome moderne n’a qu’un mot: *c’était indefinissable* . . . Admirable expression. Elle résume la littérature fantastique; elle dit tout ce qui échappe aux perceptions bornées de notre esprit; et quand vous l’avez placées sous les yeux d’un lecteur, il est lancé dans l’espace imaginaire” (For all these remarkable things, modern idiom has but the one word: *it was indefinable* . . . An admirable expression. It sums up the literature of the fantastic; it says everything that eludes the limited perceptions of our spirit; and when you have placed it before the eyes of a reader, he is launched into imaginary space).

In the years that followed, Balzac rejected the literature of fantasy, which for him had meant art as the mystical knowledge of everything, and turned to the minute description of the world as it is, still convinced that he was expressing the secret of life. Just as Balzac himself was for a long time uncertain whether to make Frenhofer into a seer or a madman, so his story continues to contain an ambiguity in which its deepest truth resides. The artist’s imagination is a world of potentialities that no work will succeed in realizing. What we experience by living is another world, answering to other forms of order and disorder. The layers of words that accumulate on the page, like the layers of colors on the canvas, are yet another world, also infinite but more easily controlled, less refractory to formulation. The link between the three worlds is the *indefinable* spoken of by Balzac: or, rather, I would call it the *undecidable*, the paradox of an infinite whole that contains other infinite wholes.

A writer—and I am speaking of a writer of infinite ambitions, like Balzac—carries out operations that involve the infinity of his imagination or the infinity of the contingency that may be attempted, or both, by means of the infinity of linguistic possibili-

ties in writing. Some might object that a single lifetime, from birth to death, can contain only a finite amount of information. How can the individual's stock of images and individual experience extend beyond that limit? Well, I believe that these attempts to escape the vortex of multiplicity are useless. Giordano Bruno explained to us that the *spiritus phantasticus* from which the writer's imagination draws forms and figures is a bottomless well; and as for external reality, Balzac's *Comédie humaine* starts from the assumption that the written world can be homologous to the living world, not only that of today but also of yesterday or tomorrow.

As a writer of fantasy, Balzac tried to capture the world soul in a single symbol among the infinite number imaginable; but to do this he was forced to load the written word with such intensity that it would have ended by no longer referring to a world outside its own self, like the colors and lines in Frenhofer's picture. When he reached this threshold, Balzac stopped and changed his whole program: no longer intensive but extensive writing. Balzac the realist would try through writing to embrace the infinite stretch of space and time, swarming with multitudes, lives, and stories.

But could it not happen as it does in Escher's pictures, which Douglas Hofstadter cites as an illustration of Gödel's paradox? In a gallery of paintings, a man is looking at the landscape of a city, and this landscape opens up to embrace the gallery that contains it and the man who is looking at it. In his infinite *Comédie humaine* Balzac should also have included the writer of fantasy that he was or had been, with all his infinite fantasies; and he should have included the realistic writer that he was or wanted to be, intent on capturing the infinite real world in his "human comedy." (Though maybe it is the infinite inner world of Balzac the fantasist that includes the inner world of Balzac the realist, because

one of the infinite fantasies of the former coincides with the realistic infinity of the *Comédie humaine* . . . .)

Still, all "realities" and "fantasies" can take on form only by means of writing, in which outwardness and innerness, the world and I, experience and fantasy, appear composed of the same verbal material. The polymorphic visions of the eyes and the spirit are contained in uniform lines of small or capital letters, periods, commas, parentheses—pages of signs, packed as closely together as grains of sand, representing the many-colored spectacle of the world on a surface that is always the same and always different, like dunes shifted by the desert wind.