
EXPLORATIONS

Writing in Time

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A few years ago I was traveling around the countryside of the state of Morelos in Mexico with my friend the Brooklyn-based playwright Jack Gelber and his wife, Carol. We lost our way in that maze of mountains and cane fields and rice paddies and stopped to ask an old peasant the name of the village we had wandered into.

"Well, that depends," answered the peasant. "We call the village Santa María in times of peace. We call it Zapata in times of war."

That old campesino knew what most people in the West have assiduously ignored since the seventeenth century: that there is more than one time in the world, that there is another time existing alongside, above, underneath the linear time of the calendars of the West. This man who could live in the time of Zapata or the time of Santa María, depending, was a living heir to a complex culture of many strata in creative tension.

I suspect he has a brother in India for whom the past is never the past but rather an unending present, a present perpetually enriched by what the West would have condemned to the past. I suspect he has yet another sibling in China who conceives time as a purely dynastic proposition and a nephew, perhaps, in North Africa, for whom time, far from developing in a horizontal line from past to present to future, is perceived as a parallel and vertical ascent of Man and God.

I further imagine he has a young grandson living among the Imerima people in Madagascar, who refuse to exile the old time in benefit of the new; one and the other, instead of mutually driving themselves out, add themselves up in a perpetual accretion. There, everything is alive and present; the Imerima resume all possible history in two slopes of reality: the heritage of the ears and the memory of the lips.

The ears and the lips of those of us who hail from that motley array of nations known, for lack of a better name, as "Third World," hear and say that perhaps this coming decade *in* time must be the decade *of* time if time, in whatever form we wish to speak of it, is to survive as the capacious cradle of life itself.

By the decade of time I mean a time in which the critique of time becomes paramount as the explicit or implicit reality behind many, perhaps most, of the problems we shall be facing. The critique of time proposes a critique of history as exclusive future orientation; a critique of the idea of progress and consequently a reevaluation of what Miguel de Unamuno called "*el sentimiento trágico de la vida*," the tragic sense of life; and, finally, a critique of hegemony and subservency on the international scene—for, as we shall see, the imposition of only *one* concept of time is a denial not only of the plurality of times of the civilizations far from the privileged basin of the North Atlantic region, but of the civilizations *themselves*, insofar as their difference in time is but the sign of their cultural difference. As we consider time we shall consider culture: as a uniformity imposed on all by two rival power centers; or as a diversity shared and nurtured by all and springing from multiple centers.

Also, I believe that if the '80s offer the danger of a time that can be the end of time, then literature will play a fundamental role in understanding time as the theme of the decade. If the future is to have a future, it will have to have a past. More than any other discipline, literature forcefully tells us that if you chase the past out of the window it will come back through the front door wearing the strangest disguises. The wars against memory are finally lost by those who undertake them.

This shall be especially true of the decade we are now embarked upon when, from my perspective, the perspective of a Mexican, a Latin American, that is, a man from the eccentric reaches of the West, at least three basic realities loom rather large in our lives.

The first is the reemergence of the cultures as an expression of dissatisfaction with the synthetic quality of the ideologies and with the sacrifices imposed by the indiscriminate rush toward the dogmatic values of the future and progress.

The second is the internal tension, within the cultures themselves, between the technocratic, multinational demands of the so-called global village (in reality a very tiny, if far-flung village, containing a small minority of mankind) and the assertions of local differences, regionalisms, decentralizations, and subcultures (what we might call, in opposition to the global village, the *root* metropolis, the familiar *first city* of mankind).

The third is the reassertion of the cultures—at the level of the region, the national states or the historical continents—as new centers of political and economic power.

The latter reality promises strife and tension in order to surpass the bipolar hegemony in international relations in favor of a multipolar world. The dangers are great because never, since the end of the Second World War, have the two strongest nations on our globe witnessed such an erosion of both their internal and external powers. Their temptation to strike back at the world, in confusion,

in order to prove their *machismo*, invoking the danger of a driftless vacuum if they do not reassert themselves, can only be surpassed effectively by the political action of the emerging multipolar powers—China and Japan, Western Europe, India and Islam, eventually Latin America and Black Africa—in order to deflect confrontation and multiply flexible, regional, or bilateral alliances and solutions instead of universal collision courses. Mexico and Venezuela in the Caribbean, West Germany and France in Europe, have demonstrated what new centers of power can do in terms of cooperation where the old powers would simply meet eyeball to eyeball.

The second reality I referred to—the tension between multinational and local demands—validates the importance of the national state as the historical filter, the center of decisions between multinational power at the top and regional power at the bottom.

And finally, the first reality proposes the reelaboration of the concept of time, of central and eccentric cultures and powers, of the destiny of progress and the tragic destiny and of the role of language and imagination in this recasting of our civilization in agreement with our deeper and not more ephemeral traditions. Since it is at this level that my own task, that of a writer, is engaged, let me follow its path—not a broad highway, I grant you, but rather a maze of mountains and fields and paddies resembling the lands where our old peasant friend was able to distinguish two times for his life as a man.

The West has been in love with its successive, linear, and positivistic notion of time, and not without reason. It has been a highly successful time, the bearer of progress, scientific inquiry, technology, capitalist expansion, and ideological conviction. At least since the eighteenth century, the dominating strain of the Western world has condemned the past to death as the tomb of irrationality and celebrated the future as the promise of perfectibility.

When Voltaire exclaimed "*Ecrasez l'infâme!*" I suspect he was not only referring to the transcendental church he wished to supplant with a secular church, but to the totality of a barbarous past based on irrationality, witchcraft, and superstition. But Voltaire was not only abolishing the past. Along with Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, and Condorcet, he was proclaiming the essential and constant character of human nature everywhere and therefore the illusory character of variety.

Montesquieu's character demanded in puzzlement: "How is it possible to be a Persian?" Indeed, how is it possible, within this limited vision of time and the human beings who live different times, to be a Tanzanian, an Algerian, a Pakistani, or a Mexican? Eurocentrism depended on this contradiction: human nature is constant, the same, but actually it is only the human nature of the eight-

eenth-century Europeans who have had the privilege of moving, from Oliver Twist's grimy back streets or Catherine Earnshaw's gloomy moors, to the bucolic commercialism of Jane Austen's balls and parishes or to the heights, why not, of Becky Sharp's Vanity Fair, all the while reading the *philosophes* and discovering that their nature—that of Voltaire as well as that of Elizabeth Bennet—is universal human nature.

Since in this operation the past is abolished as irrational, the constant and identical human nature can only be that of Enlightened Europeans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they perceived it. Since it is always the same, it cannot be historical. But since it is always the same, it must be universal.

Perhaps what we call "the modern world" (and what will modernity, in the future, call *us*?) is born, as much from the wanderings—the going out of themselves, of their enclosed societies—of two opposite gentlemen, as from the geographical revolution of Columbus or the physical revolution of Copernicus (certainly much more than from the fall of Constantinople to the Turks). One, Don Quixote, leaves the world of certainty, where everything resembled everything else, and discovers in astonishment the world of difference—where nothing, any longer, resembles anything. Don Quixote rises from the shadows of the Spain of the Counter-Reformation—the Spain of the Habsburgs—to remind the modern world that its conquests are illusory, that its realism is unreal, that its glorious present is corrupt and that in life, as well as in literature, a bargain has to be struck between the analogy of the past and the differentiation of the present. Don Quixote's enduring legacy to the novelists who emulate him (and which one of us doesn't?) is a conflict: how to recapture resemblance without sacrificing variety?

The other, Robinson Crusoe, is the first capitalist hero, the first self-made man of the modern novel. He is shipwrecked on an island, left to his resources, his ingenuity, his Protestant values. He is constrained by nature, yet free to subdue her. He takes private enterprise, future orientation, and his sense of human dignity and freedom to a godforsaken island in the Third World. Alone, he is the admirable paradigm of modernity. Accompanied, he reserves human rights for himself but denies them to his subject, Friday. As he meets the world, Robinson ceases to be modern: he falls back on slavery, the oldest shame of the human race. As he goes out of himself, he does not share his values: he colonizes; that is, he alienates the other as he abstracts his values.

What we call "modernity" is more often than not this process whereby the rising industrial and mercantile classes of Europe gave unto themselves the role of universal protagonists of history. The rest of the world could be Friday—in effect, the cast of thousands in the epic of the white man's burden, and Locke would be as generous as he could when he stated that human understanding is assumed to be in all places the same, although imperfectly developed in children, idiots, and savages. He was inviting children, idiots, and savages to join the march

toward happiness in the future proposed, headed, and dished out by the West in an unending progression, as Condorcet put it, of humanity toward final perfection. Locke's utopia had a name: Capitalism—since men unite in government with the sole purpose of defending private property. And Condorcet's optimism had a name: Death. He wrote his supreme exercise in beatitude—*A Sketch on the Progress of the Human Spirit*—under the shadow of the guillotine, condemned to death by the Terror and finally poisoned by the agents of Robespierre. Locke's utopia, indeed, was no utopia at all, but a radical anti-utopia, since utopian thought places the values of the community *above* the values of power or the individual as such, including the property values of one or the other. And Condorcet's optimism only demonstrated that history, for all the good wishes of the Enlightenment, continued to be the place of violence.

The most lucid man of the French Revolution, the glorious, terrible, and unfortunate Saint-Just, confronted head-on what he referred to as the struggle between the demon of hope and the demon of fatality in historical violence: cross and crossroads of the revolutions in which first, according to Saint-Just, words at last become acts (and this is the glory and the hope of history), and then, the force of things leads us to results we had not foreseen (and this is the confusion and contradiction of history). The Revolution against the enemies of the Revolution is epic; the Revolution against the partisans of the Revolution is tragic.

Trotsky seemed to know this when he asked for a revolutionary art that would reflect all the contradictions of the revolutionary social system. He praised tragedy as "a high expression of literature because it implies the heroic tenacity of strivings, of limitless aims, of conflicts and sufferings." He was not sure whether revolutionary art would succeed in producing "high revolutionary tragedy." But he was sure that Socialist art would revive tragedy. "Without God, of course," he added. Stalin gave Trotsky a revolutionary tragedy without God, and Trotsky was one of its victims.

A century before Stalinism, another unfortunate youth, the German poet George Büchner, dead of typhus at age twenty-four, wrote in his drama of the French Revolution, *Danton's Death*: "Never again will it be possible to accuse God, because God does not exist. Rebellious freedom has occupied all the space of the world."

The time of the West, the time of rebellious freedom, the internal time of Luther and Adam Smith, of Rousseau and Jefferson, became, in its exterior manifestation, the time of Robinson Crusoe and Gunga Din, the violent time of a history imposed against those who did not share the time of the West or the values of the West: the East, the South, and, in a time deprived of a position in space, the cultures of all the people who live in the sacred, circular time of the origins.

The Enlightenment consummated the secularization of Judeo-Christian millenarianism and, for the first time, placed the Golden Age, not only on the

earth, but in the future. From the most ancient soothsayer to Don Quixote, from Homer to Erasmus, all of them seated around the same bonfire of the goatherds, the time of paradise was in the past. But, starting with Condorcet, with the age of the American and French revolutions, the idyll of mankind has only one time, the future. On its promises the industrialized world is built. And the promise of the future is called happiness. . . .

Felicidad, bonheur, felicità, happiness. We promise you you shall be happy. All of us? Well, no, first white men, then property owners, then, perhaps, maybe. . . . When? Well, tomorrow, probably, as soon as we finish this tremendous trial against God, tragic pessimism, and historical barbarity—as soon as we educate our little brown brothers sufficiently, as soon as we eradicate the bourgeois class enemy lurking behind every dissident voice, as soon as we remake the more unfortunate races in our Caucasian image, as soon as we teach Latin Americans to elect good men to office, as soon as we teach the Czechs and the Poles that they cannot learn socialism by themselves. Tomorrow denies us its face, but only tomorrow will happiness exist. All the advanced industrial states hinge on this heritage; capitalist and Marxist regimes share the religion of futurity. In its cloudy mirror we gaze blindly at the terrible question our times hollowly ask us: Why are we being oppressed in the name of justice, enslaved in the name of freedom, murdered in the name of life?

In part, I believe the answer lies precisely in the ability with which the industrialized societies have learned to forget the past in order to enshrine the future. Let us consider the second problem first, since our most patent danger in the order of time, in the measure that we exist in an order of time, is that an unwitting, unselective, and amnesiac rush toward the future is endangering our future; that in the name of the future, we are in danger of having no future at all.

This enslavement to an acritical futurization of all things is all the more dangerous because it so intimately informs both the vision that the industrial powers have of the rest of humanity and of the spurious necessity that is said to drive the economic world. Both visions lead us to an insane separation that condemns the past to death and nourishes what Michel de Certeau has called “the discourse of separation.”

Certeau, who is French, Freudian, and Jesuit—a dangerous combination—tells us that the modern history of the West is nothing if not the constant separation between past and present with the purpose of seeing to it that the past is really the past so that we ourselves, in accordance with the ideological, economic, and political project of the industrialized societies, shall always be *other*, different from the past, new, and in consequence hungry for novelty in the arts, fashion, entertainment, gadgets, machines: novelty has become the certificate of our happiness. The price consists in forgetting that our destiny is also to become *the other dead* when the future decides that *we* are the past.

It means forgetting, too, the *tragic* perspective that is at the root of the civilized freedom of the West. The religion of progress, basically allied to forms of causal thinking, could not admit the tragic vision whose death Nietzsche laments because it deprived us of that figure, embodied in Oedipus, "destined to error and misery despite his wisdom, yet exercising a beneficent influence upon his environment in virtue of his boundless grief." The tragic poet, adds Nietzsche, tells us that a man who is truly noble is incapable of sin. Though every law, every natural order perish by his actions, those very actions will create a circle of higher consequences above to found a new world on the ruins of the old. The tragic hero suffers, warns, and restores the values of the community.

Hegel said that tragedy is the conflict between right and right. Max Scheler and, most recently, Camus, would translate this idea into an affirmation that I find particularly valid for us, for our writing, today: Tragedy happens within the sphere of values, not of virtues, and it represents a conflict between equally vigorous values—the city and the individual (*Antigone*), the wife and the mother (*Medea*), the freedom of the Creator and the freedom of the creature (*Prometheus*). Thus, tragedy does not admit the notion of guilt. The tragic conflict is not fatal; neither is it free. It is necessary. It is the means by which freedom reconquers itself beyond the limits of fatality. And when we deny the existence of the tragic, we are deceiving ourselves in respect to the goodness of the world we inhabit; we can also be sure that tragedy is preparing to launch an attack against us, taking advantage of our complacency. The pretension of abolishing the tragic is in itself tragic.

These warnings were not heard by history, and the tragedy of history became the absence of tragedy. Guernica, Auschwitz, the Gulag, My Lai, the prisons and tortures in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, the genocide in Guatemala or El Salvador are not tragedies, they are crimes. They are a corruption of the tragic, for in tragedy the conflict must lie between equal values, whereas in modern history an inferior value can destroy the superior value of life, and when an object of superior value—the life of a girl named Anne Frank in Holland, the life of a writer named Rodolfo Walsh in Argentina—is destroyed by an object as evil as Nazism or as insignificant as a South American dictator, tragedy becomes impossible but history becomes irrational.

Octavio Paz has noted that the modern age has justified itself by its consecration of criticism, including criticism against itself. If Montesquieu could call economics the science of human happiness, Carlyle, a century later, would call it "the dismal science." Thus modernity is that rarity: an age that cannot consecrate itself without losing its critical claim to legitimacy. Now, as we en-

ter the '80s, we can observe that this critique, a condition, indeed, for the legitimacy and the exclusion of self-consecration for the modern age, was not sufficiently distanced. We call the supreme value of contemporary life progress. But this value, which *is* a value, seems inferior to the degree that it has not been capable of engendering, as was true with classic values, the external or internal opponent to progress itself. The free enemy of the freedom of progression would have been called the tragic sense of progress and it would have eliminated what Hannah Arendt saw as the criminal banality with which the exceptions to progress—or are they the rules of indiscriminate optimism?—have had to confront the history of the twentieth century. Progress has lacked the capacity to criticize itself beyond criticism, that is, in the tragic sphere; to amputate its errors as it discovers them in the bosom of its success. As it could not shed its errors tragically, it did so criminally: the century of material freedom has also been the century of criminal calamity.

Dostoevsky, whose most profound message is the assertion of tragic humanity in all its consequences, did not forget, and his terrible, ironical, and haunted legacy as the first tragic novelist of the modern age is that he evoked the specter of an order of values worthy of destroying us.

We are not immortal. Shall we at least have the freedom, in the coming years, to choose a death that does not overly diminish us, that does not banalize us more than the radioactive dust that awaits us? Simone Weil writes of *The Iliad*: "Those who dreamed that because of progress force was forever banished to the past, have now seen the living testimony of violence in this poem." The great Judeo-Christian philosopher was writing in 1940 as the Panzer divisions were rolling across Holland and Belgium and France, but she refused to see in them, in their ridiculous and diabolic force, the mirror of that internal historicity of power and violence that "in the heart of every human testament encounters in *The Iliad* its purest and most beautiful mirror."

What Simone Weil, one of the two or three greatest philosophical critics of our times, reminds us of is truly of the other possibilities of the West, the forgotten alternatives to its agonizing course that abound in the extremely rich heritage of the culture that extends from the Mediterranean to the Baltic or, as de Gaulle would have it, from the Atlantic to the Urals. But can you see yourself if you do not see others? Ah, there is an intuition here that I want to grab by the tail, because it so marvelously serves the intention of my plea—my hopeful plea, not my requiem, not my elegy.

Remember, says Simone Weil, we made *The Iliad*, let us not forget it; it is not of another planet simply because it is of another time; remember what humanity, *our* humanity, knew so long ago: that when might tries to extend as far as nature it makes things of persons, it violently crushes and beheads them in the name of glory, but when glory unmask itself it shows that its true face is death.

And that men should have death for their future "is a denial of nature." Nature knows not death: history, our violence, do. The epic and tragic genius of Greece, says Simone Weil, is rediscovered only when modern men learn how never to admire might, or hate the enemy, or despise those who suffer.

There is a double lesson here, a lesson for the West to come out of the criminal pratfall of its violent glory through an understanding of itself that shall be inseparable from the understanding of others. Both the intelligence of self and the intelligence of the other are indispensable to overcome the blind Western refusal to recognize the other, the strange, the different.

Other cultures refuse to be judged by a simplistic anachronism. What is different from the time of the West is not "medieval" or "barbaric." To say this is to prolong an imperial ethnocentrism. It is to forget that what for a man in Europe may be medieval, for a man in Central Asia may be the present. Or, as J. B. Priestley states in his foreword to the novel by the Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*: "We are apt to forget that all humanity is not living with us in the twentieth century. . . ."

To discover the other is to discover our forgotten self. The West that fails to understand that the uniformization of cultures and their times would mean a perpetuation, even an exacerbation, of the very factors that have contributed to the difficulty of life in our age, is the very West that in its heritage possesses the keenest appreciation of the other—the Homeric lesson, how never to admire might, or hate the enemy, or despise those who suffer, yes, but also, along with the great German philosopher of science Leibniz, the conviction, expressed more than three hundred years ago, that Europe could profit by the experience by cultures older than or different from its own; the final recognition of the humanity of Robinson as he recognizes the humanity of Friday, for Friday shall save Robinson from a fate worse than that of being the slave owner.

This reflection on Robinson Crusoe leads me to consider the paradox that the West, on the one hand, offered the colonized peoples of the South and the East its values at an abstract level, fully knowing that the concrete conditions for their fulfillment were not *there*: the Bill of Rights, the Code of Napoleon, British jurisprudence . . . yet the eccentric, colonial world took the West at its word and, no matter how grave or ludicrous its failings, continues to adhere to the values it, the Third World, *really* made into universal values, *really* set to the test. That human rights should today equally move the people of Uganda and Argentina, Cambodia and El Salvador, South Africa and Chile, is the ironical triumph of the West—ironical because it, the West, is recognized more fully by the marginal peoples of the world than it ever recognized them.

On the other hand, the West, through its literature, internally elaborated a

plurality of times in stark contrast to its external, chosen adherence to one time, the future-oriented time of progress. Both paradoxes come together in another searing problem: the problem of law, of the relation between concrete freedom and the enunciation of the law. The supreme human right, the supreme freedom, which for me is the right and the freedom to give shape to your destiny because both you and the world are unfinished, is at the heart of this debate that unites time, tragedy, history, and destiny in an inseparable cluster; these are the fruits we can pick together.

If history has been criminal, time must again become tragic if history is to have any sense. This tragic time is a creation, above all, of some writers. Dostoevsky first and then, in our own century, Kafka, Hermann Broch, Faulkner, and Beckett.

Freedom already exists. This is the implicit postulation in all the legislation of progress. Are not the entrepreneur, the laborer, the child, the woman, the individual, indeed humankind, already free because the law declares them to be so? If we are all free, then nothing is tragic. From Dostoevsky to Beckett, the tragic writers tell us this is not so: true freedom consists in the minimal possibility of offering a sense to reality, of giving a sense to the world. Freedom, thus, is always something to be achieved. Not even the sullen Machiavelli dared say the contrary. For the author of *The Prince*, "God will not do everything, for that would deprive us of our free will, and of that share of glory which belongs to us."

What the truly conscious voice of the modern West demands is that the identification of freedom with the struggle for freedom not become an infinitely postponed abstraction: a freedom in the future. The struggle is *now* and the voice belongs to the poet Schiller when, in his famous conference at the University of Jena in 1789, he demanded *the future now*. The very same year of the outbreak of the French Revolution, Schiller refused a promise constantly deferred in order that it would always be a lie without any possible confirmation; thus, always a truth, always a promise at the expense of the wholeness of the present.

The modern world had to wait for the twentieth century to simultaneously consecrate totalitarianism and nihilism so that, in the Kafkian legislation, reality would have a final, definitive sense given to it by *The Law*. It is therefore declared useless to look for another sense. Do you insist, Herr K? Then you shall be eliminated in the name of the Law. The Enlightenment ends in Kafka: You *must* be happy, or else . . . or else you are a b—u—g, *bug*.

The absurdity of freedom and the law in Kafka is a forceful reminder that the true coincidence of man and society requires the tragic vision, which is a vision of conflict and reconciliation, as against the Manichean vision, which is a vision of guilt and extermination. When a religion claims historical foundations, suggests Nietzsche, it is because it wants to justify its dogmatism "under the severe, rational eyes of orthodoxy": *You must be guilty if I am to be innocent*. Tragedy

exclaims with the Aeschylean Prometheus: "Whatever exists is both just and unjust, and equally justified in both."

This is the tragic wisdom we can achieve only if we ask the perplexing questions of our time beyond the Manichaeic simplicity—I am innocent, you are guilty; I am happy, you are not; I am free, you are a slave. This is the order of separation. We strive for the order of reunion when we ask ourselves how to be guilty because we are innocent, unhappy because we are happy, enslaved because we are free.

And who, if Truth and Justice do not coincide, embodies these realities at a more disquieting level than Ivan Karamazov, who crosses a threshold of sorts when he chooses to be on the side of Justice against Truth? This is a deeply disturbing choice because, as Camus explains, in tragedy the forces in conflict are equally legitimate, equally moral in the deepest sense—that of being capable, if they are defeated, of attaching value to their experience. Value, not virtue.

And one of the dimensions of value as it tends toward reunion with its opposite must certainly be, even as it is ignored and sometimes even violated, the value we can, finally, call *the time of the other*. The tragic theme in Faulkner is the restoration of the community divided, not by history (in this instance, the military and economic force of the North) but by men and women who have already divided their lands and their souls: *both* their natures. Faulkner marvelously identifies this theme through a reunion of all the times of his characters in the present instant. And this present time is a collective time; no one talks alone in Faulkner. Miss Rosa Coldfield, the Sutpens, and the Comptons all share their time, for the unity of all times is the only possible response to division: the affirmation of the collective I-Am against the forces of alienation: "The ode, the elegy, the epitaph," says Faulkner, "born from some bitter and implacable reserve of non-defeat."

So we must come to a new reunion with the true values of the West because it is in literature that the West has best applied its critical mind to the problem of time. Yet another paradox, if you please: if on the economic and political plane the West has been incapable of recognizing the variety of time, in its literary heritage, from Homer to Faulkner, in the writings of Sterne, Coleridge, and Henry James, from Cervantes's critique of reading to Joyce's critique of writing, at the heart of Proust's bedchamber, Kafka's castle, or Virginia Woolf's lighthouse, it does nothing but offer us a dazzling *ars combinatoria* of the possibilities of time.

We live today. Tomorrow we shall have an image of today. We cannot ignore this, as we cannot ignore that the past was lived, that the origin of the past is the present. I am paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty when he says that history is a strange object: an object that is ourselves. A false history, I would add, is a history that is not ourselves. And a false language, a language that has ceased

to be the first social reality, perhaps the truest instance of the collective, the name of our first identity.

Language permits us to know. And the name of the knowledge of literature is imagination, including the imagination of time. Giambattista Vico, on founding modern historiography in *La Scienza Nuova* of 1734, warned that if history is the work of humankind (and he was, perhaps, the first thinker to say this), this privilege imposes on humankind the burden of imagining history. No one was present in the past, but there is no living present with a dead past.

In the West and its eccentric reaches, including Latin America, the most precise function of literature in history has been defined by the novel. The novel is the literary form that, with most complexity, permits us to reappropriate time. The novel, as I see it, is a reintroduction of man into history and of the subject into his destiny; it is, thus, an instrument for the attainment of freedom. There is no novel without history; but the novel, while introducing us into history, also permits us to seek a way out of history in order to see history and therefore be truly historical. To be immersed in history, lost in history without the possibility of a way out is to be, simply, the victims of history.

In the '80s, I believe this traditional function of the novel will be enhanced by the necessity of introducing different civilizations to each other. As never before, the choice is stark: we shall either know each other or exterminate each other. The future promised by the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is here. The future has now taken place. We have seen the future—and it does not work. And again: we have seen the future and it looks like Sevesso, Three Mile Island, and Love Canal. It looks like the grim streets of Kafka's Prague. At long last, the *hubris* of the Homeric hero can be satiated: we are now capable of destroying Nature. Nature, like the Hero, can now know death.

We can only be—be today, which is the only way of being tomorrow—by refusing to promise that same future all over again, as if it had never happened. We might offer ourselves, for a change, the time of our cultures, the plural civilizations we have created as men and women, as children and artists, the time where nothing is assassinated and condemned to a dead past in order to free more space—as in a basement sale—for the novelty that becomes old as soon as it sets foot on the scene.

The future has happened. The millennium of progress and happiness is here, but it does not explain or justify injustice and unhappiness.

Michel Foucault has written memorably that ancient philosophy taught us to accept our own death, whereas modern ideology teaches us to accept the death of others. Before, Nietzsche had said that history explains everything except the unexplainable; the mission of art is not to explain but to affirm the multiplicity of what is real.

I would add: including the multiplicity of time.

A writer for the '80s, then? Borges: "He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever-spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times."

A writer for the '80s? Faulkner: "All is present, you understand? Yesterday will not end until tomorrow, and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

A writer for the '80s? Virginia Woolf: "Let us contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system."

A writer for the '80s? Proust: "But let a sound, a smell, already heard or breathed before, be heard or breathed again, at once in the present and in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, then the essence, the permanent and habitually hidden essence of things is liberated and our own true self awakens."

A writer for the '80s? Kafka: "There shall be much hope, but not for us."

A writer for the '80s? Beckett: "This earth could be uninhabited."

These words are important. They are telling us that there is a common place, not an abstract place, not an Olympus but an Agora, the shared space where we live our history and say our words.

Societies are sick when they accept that history—the history we have made—and words—the words we have made—are finished, complete, perfect, and that the correct answers must be imposed by orthodox judges on the totality of the culture.

Societies are healthy when they accept that history and language are an unfinished business—*our* unfinished business—and bring questions and skepticism to bear on that unsatisfaction. In the world of the 1980s, the surest guarantee of a healthy world community is understanding this through the aspirations of the societies that do not dare consider themselves finished, that perpetually propose themselves as a problem, that constantly reclaim their present, *this* present, as the time of their living past and their living future.

The industrialized world has known no greater challenge. Will it admit the *other* cultures into the present? Will it share the space of presence with them? Will it cope with the hazards of dealing with *cultures* instead of *states* in international relations? Within its own civilization, the West has been able to reshape time in the varied molds of literature, particularly the novel. Today can it exclude whole civilizations, whole constellations of time from the formal and material embrace it requires to go on being a civilization?

On the nature of our answer to this question depends the nature of our writing, our thinking, indeed our living. We shall now live together or die together. This is the final option of time.

Humankind has tried to save itself from death by demanding one more night and one more story: a few more words to stall destruction. Scheherazade is the

mother of literature. Proust's narrator is her modern son. They are not the Caliph, they are not the Caesar. Their battlefields are not in the seas and trenches and the bombarded air. They are in the mind, in the speech, in the hearts of human beings who are no less courageous for upholding a human language in the fields of La Mancha than for sinking an Ottoman fleet off Lepanto, for living through the dream and agony of Leopold Bloom's day in Dublin than for fighting in the bloody wastelands of the Marne.

For how could we know ourselves without a language?

And if we do not know ourselves, how are we to know the other?

And if we do not know the other, how are we to care for him, love him, respect him, avoid destroying him?

Writing in time, a time for writing, urgently. Simply because we know, in the words of Beckett, that "This world could be uninhabited."