

Ambiguity, the Artist, the Masses, and the "Double Nature" of Language

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Abstract: In her article "Ambiguity, the Artist, the Masses, and the 'Double Nature' of Language" Elizabeth Rechniewski discusses the function of the European intellectual elite through a close reading of two very different yet related books, John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, and Pierre Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art*. Through a contrapuntal reading of the arguments of these two critics, she argues that Symbolist experiments may actually be read as reactionist; in celebrating art's supposed conquest of independence and refinement, they are replete with nostalgia for a time when the artist and the intellectual were able to ignore the pressure and the demands made on art from the outside. Rechniewski argues that the "double nature" of language is less a discovery of the nineteenth-century avant-garde than a stake in their struggle over the control of culture within an artistic field split between the fields of the masses and restricted production. The assertion of the essential ambiguity of language opens up a space for creation and interpretation to which the specialist — writer, critic, scholar — has privileged, perhaps exclusive access: this claim underpins their deontology, the professional ideology which legitimates their activity.

Elizabeth RECHNIEWSKI

Ambiguity, the Artist, the Masses, and the "Double Nature" of Language

In 1992 two works were published which sought to cast light on the origins of the modernist aesthetic: John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art*. There has been little or no comparison of these two books, which nevertheless offer complementary perspectives on developments in the artistic project on the one hand in the United Kingdom, on the other in France, from the late nineteenth century onwards. In particular, both situate the modernist aesthetic in the problematic nature of the relationship of the artist to society. Taking as its starting-point the analyses offered by these two scholars, I explore the origins of the crisis of representation triggered as language became a stake in the struggle launched against the encroachment of mass culture by writers who, seeking to free language from its subordination to the ends of reason, materiality, utility, and practicality, advanced the claims of ambiguity, uncertainty, and even obscurity.

In *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Carey identifies the origin of the disparate movement known as modernism in the hostility of intellectuals towards the social changes resulting from industrialization and urbanization. In Great Britain, in the course of the nineteenth century, the social landscape was invaded by new demographic groups, notably the workers, who crowded into the cities, and the lower middle class, who increasingly populated the spreading suburbs. According to Carey, intellectuals and artists found the presence of these populations menacing and overwhelming, all the more so because it was accompanied by other developments which threatened the intellectuals' control over culture: mass education, almost universal literacy, and a popular press that addressed this new public. Analyzing the work mainly of English writers at the turn of the century, Carey traces what he represents as their preoccupation, indeed their obsession, with the looming presence of "the masses," a term which was widely used, although in Carey's view it is a highly problematic one: do "the masses" really exist, or are they the projection of the intellectuals who are unable to distinguish any individuality in what appears to be, from their critical perspective, an amorphous, undifferentiated crowd? Their reaction in any case was to seek to keep the masses at a distance by imposing barriers to their entry into the sphere of culture (Carey 16-17). They could not, of course, actually prevent them from attaining literacy, but they could place obstacles in the way of their access to literature and this, argues Carey, they sought to do. The early twentieth century saw a determined effort on the part of the European intelligentsia to exclude the masses from high culture.

Popular culture offered human interest stories, emotional reactions with which the reader could identify, a strong plot, and recognizable characters. High culture would therefore explore the negative poles, would seek to break the mould of the codes and generic conventions that had defined art. What Ortega y Gasset describes as the "dehumanization" of modern art prevented easy identification and appreciation of the work of art by the masses (17-18). Irrationality and obscurity were cultivated; realism and representation of the sort that it was assumed the masses appreciated were abandoned. Clearly, in this endeavor, language was a key tool and a key obstacle: the basic skills of literacy were now widespread and, as a result, the manipulation and monopoly of public language that had been the *apanage* of an elite risked passing into the hands of ordinary people. The mechanisms of control over language therefore came to occupy a central place in the reflections and practice of the cultural avant-gardes.

Carey's argument and examples focus almost exclusively on English writers, and on novelists. However it is not difficult to apply his arguments across the Channel to the avant-gardes of nineteenth-century France. Bourdieu brings his own particular theoretical framework to the study of French writers of the second half of the nineteenth century, and offers a subtle analysis and explanation for the alienation of the artist from the masses. Despite the breadth of Bourdieu's theoretical preoccupations and the range of his empirical studies of areas as diverse as Kabyl communities and the Grandes Ecoles, it can be argued that the study of artistic production and consumption constituted his most abiding interest. Following his articles of the 1960s and early 1970s, including "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur" and "Disposition esthétique et compétence artistique," he returned

many times to the subject, in such as *La Distinction* and in *Les Règles de l'art*. There are some differences between the position he outlined in the first articles and that of *Les Règles*, but it is also true that his theoretical approach to the understanding of creative activity, artistic ideology, and aesthetic and critical reflection remained broadly the same: the necessity to ground understanding in an analysis of the structure of the artistic field.

From the late eighteenth century, he argues, artistic production increasingly emerged from the broader social and political spheres as a semi-autonomous field of activity, acquiring institutions, means of production and circulation (publishing houses, journals), markets and publics, practitioners and critics, the latter groups having an interest in the perpetuation and development of the independent functioning of the field since it gave them access to various forms of capital, not only financial but also symbolic and, perhaps, social. In the middle of the nineteenth century the field fractured into two, a development rooted in the social and political upheavals of the years 1848-1852, which disappointed revolutionary hopes and led to the Second Empire, with its imposition of a repressive social and political order and heavy censorship (*Les Règles* 120). These socio-historical conditions provoked, argues Bourdieu, a structural misfit between the aspirations of a small group of writers, including notably Baudelaire and Flaubert, and the society of their time. Refusing to conform to the platitudinous moralism demanded by the bourgeois public, the conventional tropes of mass taste, or the social utopianism of an exhausted romanticism, they carved out their own space, a space whose slogan, "art for art's sake," proclaimed that they were not prepared to bow to the demands of the general public. This, the field of restricted production, was a world of inverted economic order where economic penury was symbolic gain (*Les Règles* 122).

The division of the artistic field into the fields of mass and restricted production induces certain characteristics of the artistic and critical activity in both fields. In the field of mass production, commercial capitalism satisfies the demands of public taste by providing formulaic and predictable content delivered in clearly defined generic forms. In the restricted field, the creators react against what they see as the "tyranny of the market" by developing a professional ideology which defines their responsibility as solely to themselves, to their peers, and to art itself. As the restricted field closes in on itself, it creates the conditions for virtually complete autonomy and self-referentiality. Thus the reference points of art become ever more inwardly turned towards an obsessive reformulation of schools and artistic projects, as each new group, and notably each new generation, seeks to distinguish itself from its predecessors. The continual renewal of schools and programs leads to an ever-increasing attention to form, as the area where the most interesting distinctions and oppositions can be developed ("Disposition esthétique" 1348). The increasing autonomy of the field of cultural production is accompanied by a critical and self-reflexive analysis by the producers of their own production. Because they declare their rupture with external demands and those artistic products which seem to be subordinate to them (art as representation; art catering to the tastes of the general public), they seek to distinguish themselves through the development of those features of the artistic work which least resemble characteristics of the field of mass production. In this field, the public seeks instant gratification, violent sensations and emotions, recognizable and stereotypical content; it is not interested in the technical prowess of the writer and even less in analyzing the nature of this prowess — the effectiveness of mass art depends rather on the transparency of form and the familiarity of content. To affirm the specificity of the artistic product in the restricted field, the artist concentrates therefore on innovations in generic forms and experiments with language and style which mark his individuality and difference. Such experiments keep the public at bay, because to appreciate this art requires initiation into the aesthetic program of the school, arcane knowledge possessed by only a few, and knowledge of the history of the field itself, in short a sophisticated *apprentissage* available only to a few ("Disposition esthétique" 1348).

The preoccupation with form over content, the continual renewal of programs and schools in an internal dialogue barely comprehensible to those who have not followed the evolution of the avant-garde, led to the increasing abstraction of aesthetic discourse from other spheres of human activity. The demand by the artists to be judged solely in terms of their own aesthetic ambitions calls forth a critical response removed from naive sensations ("Disposition esthétique" 1364). "Pure" production supposes a "pure" reading: recognition by a critic who has become accustomed to a purely internal

reading of the work. The profession of critic can indeed only be sustained by works which refuse self-evident meanings, which demand to be deciphered to expose their polysemic nature. There thus develops between artist and critic a kind of complicity which excludes the uninitiated and which draws forth more works which respond to these expectations (*Les Règles*).

In *Les Règles de l'art*, Bourdieu attaches much explanatory importance in the development of the restricted field to the heroic personal struggles of writers such as Baudelaire and Flaubert, whose intellectual intrepidity and extraordinary determination made possible the creation of this space of resistance to the demands of the wider society. There are some interesting differences between Bourdieu's formulation of his theory in the articles of the 60s and early 70s and the one he advances in *Les Règles*. In his early articles, the fields of restricted and mass production are not represented as superior and inferior, nor as free as opposed to determined, but as essentially interdependent because defined in relation to one another. By the 1990s, however, the construction of the field of restricted production has become, in Bourdieu's thinking, exemplary of the fight by intellectuals to carve out a space independent of the temporal powers. Writers such as Baudelaire and Flaubert have become the heroes in what Bourdieu describes as the struggle to free creative activity from the limitations imposed by the contemporary constraints and conventions of artistic production (*Les Règles* 115).

This emphasis on an individual writer's personal struggle (rather unusual in the context of Bourdieu's overall sociological approach) seems to lead Bourdieu to downplay the significance of an artistic movement which was surely more important in the development of the ideology of the restricted field: the Symbolist movement. Symbolism is certainly the most significant literary movement of the late nineteenth century; it provides moreover the crucial link between Romanticism and later avant-garde movements such as Surrealism. It is significant also for the degree of theorization which it was given by practitioners such as Jean Moréas (aka Ioannis A. Papadiamantopoulos) and Stéphane Mallarmé, the latter its most powerful exponent and acknowledged leader from the 1880s, host of the weekly meetings of the circle of adherents. Symbolism's program was founded on a self-conscious reaction against the scientific materialism which dominated the philosophical field (the positivism of the Third Republic philosophers) and the socio-scientific field (for example the sociology of Comte), and against the literary expression of scientific materialism, notably the naturalism practiced by Zola. But it did not deny the portrait which Zola and other naturalist writers offered of the degradation of the masses provoked by their heredity and their environment.

French scientists and social scientists, racial theorists and medical specialists of the second half of the nineteenth century were fascinated, and often appalled, by the growth of "the masses." In their writings we find typically the association of the masses with degeneration, epidemics, mediocrity, and disease (Weber 35), themes that were taken up by many French writers, including Baudelaire and Flaubert. The Symbolists went a step further, however, because they integrated their negative views on the masses explicitly into their theory and practice. It is of some significance that the avant-garde that came to be viewed in the twentieth century as the iconic modernist movement, exerting a determining influence on subsequent generations of writers, critics, and theorists, reveals many of the traits which Carey identifies as characteristic of the intellectuals' revolt against the masses of the late nineteenth century. We find in Symbolist writing common themes with those of its English counterpart and, crucially, fear of a society that will be dominated by the physical and above all spiritual degeneration attributed to the masses. In "Le Phénomène futur," Mallarmé writes of "a wretched crowd, vanquished by immortal sickness and the sin of centuries, of men besides their sickly accomplices, pregnant with the miserable fruits from which the earth will perish"(Mallarmé qtd. in Cohn 25) ("une malheureuse foule, vaincue par la maladie immortelle et le péché des siècles, d'hommes près de leurs chétives complices enceintes des fruits misérables avec lesquels périra la terre" [*Œuvres complètes II* 83]). Rémy de Gourmont, in an article written in 1894, "Sur la hiérarchie intellectuelle" ("On Intellectual Hierarchy"), insists on the absolute distinction that exists between the creative élite and the crowd. Men, he writes, are divided into two castes: the *energétiques*, the intellectuals, those who act, create, who possess spirit and therefore strength and the *energumènes*, those who are acted upon ("Sur la hiérarchie intellectuelle" 295). The superiority of the former is demonstrated by the control they exercise over the latter. The *energumène* is tied to matter and to flesh, his behavior resembles that of an animal, although Gourmont hesitates as to which animal might best illustrate his nature:

the ant? the bee? the prairie dog? Perhaps the beaver, he decides, for this animal builds houses and bridges, lives in society, defends its territory, but without any consciousness of its actions. Similarly, the *energumène* does not reflect upon his actions but obeys only his instincts and the demands of nature: he eats, sleeps, fornicates, his life is "purely automatic" ("purement automatique"), his actions are dictated by his bodily functions ("Sur la hiérarchie intellectuelle" 296).

In "La Création subconsciente," first published in 1900, Gourmont insists that an absolute distinction exists between the two castes of men, and yet this assumption does not seem to safeguard completely the intellectual against the fear of contamination and degradation. It is dangerous for the *energétique*, he declares, to approach the crowd too closely, because of the risk of contagion: "the conscious man who mingles without reflection in the crowd, who acts as the crowd acts, loses his personality ... almost all his feelings will die away to no purpose in the collective brain of the hypothetical animal"(Gourmont qtd. in Bradley 207) ("l'homme conscient qui se mêle naïvement à la foule, qui agit dans le sens de la foule, perd sa personnalité ... presque toutes ses sensations vont mourir vainement dans le cerveau collectif de l'hypothétique animal" ["La Création subconsciente" 58]). Thus despite the inherent superiority of the artist, the crowd menaces his spiritual life and creative powers, indeed his individuality and very existence. We could extend at great length the catalogue of such examples, drawing on the work of second generation Symbolists such as André Suarès and Paul Valéry to demonstrate the fear of the crowd which characterizes two generations of French writers, over the same period that Carey addresses in his analysis of English writers. Valéry's tribute to Mallarmé is a particularly lucid restatement of these themes, with its attack on the majority, those who feel reassured to know that they are part of a crowd, thinking and feeling the same "truth," clinging to one another for comfort. The élite, the "très petit nombre d'amateurs particuliers," is marked by the desire for difference, individuality, and idealism: Valéry describes Mallarmé's *œuvre* as the highest achievement of this spiritual élite, as it maintains through creative tension an aspiration towards the ideal that is the negative pole of the art that pleases the masses (Valéry 660).

Few writers have enjoyed the critical attention that has been devoted to Mallarmé in the course of the twentieth century. He has been cited obsessively by writers and by critics and theorists as the founder of the modern aesthetic, an aesthetic of negation of the existent, of deconstruction of conventional meaning, and of an (often frustrated) aspiration towards achieving spiritual transcendence through art. Indeed it has been claimed that he placed art at the pinnacle of human activity: "Mallarmé invents a whole new role for poetic texture, shows how it can provide the solution, and can replace science and philosophy at the apogee of human creative endeavour" (Williams 146). Few of the major twentieth-century thinkers and critics have failed to hail the significance of Mallarmé: Bataille, Blanchot, Lacan, Derrida ... all devoted considerable critical attention to his work, identifying him not merely as a literary innovator but as a writer who invoked through his poetry a philosophical position that is central and even foundational for contemporary philosophy.

Among the many volumes of criticism devoted to Mallarmé's work, it is remarkable how few recognize the centrality to his thinking of his preoccupation with the menacing presence of "la foule," "the crowd," or, to adopt a translation that is certainly closer to the late nineteenth-century use of the term by writers such as Gustave Le Bon, "the mob." Whether in essays: "Art for All" ("L'Art pour tous"), "Mystery in Literature" ("Le Mystère dans les lettres"), "Crisis in Poetry" ("Crise de vers"); in prose poems; or in interviews and correspondence, this is a consistent theme and one which is present from his early writing career ("Art for All" dates from 1862) to the "Music and Literature" and "Crisis in Poetry" of the 1890s. Plato would banish the poets from the City because of the moral dangers they pose to the people; Mallarmé would distance the poets from the people because of the dangers that the latter cause to poetry. The poet's work is crowded out, overwhelmed, or traduced by the popular literature purveyed by cheap editions and the press: Mallarmé addresses with incomprehension the poet who allows his work to be made readily available in this way (*Œuvres complètes II* 363). He turns his scorn against the casual ignorance and insensibility of the public, the modern citizen who "strides through our museums with a careless freedom and an absent-minded frigidity" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("enjambe nos musées avec une liberté indifférente et une froideur distraite"), who from time to time "turns towards Rubens, Delacroix, a glance that reeks of vulgarity" ("lance à Rubens, à Delacroix, un de ces regards qui sentent la rue" [*Œuvres complètes II* 361]).

Many passages in his verse and prose poems reveal that both the bourgeoisie and the workers are included in his condemnation of the public of his time. Their tastes cannot be corrected through education: poetry cannot be explained so that all can understand, cannot be taught in schools; art is a mystery accessible only to the few. To the terms of modern society, citizenship, education, democracy, he opposes those of aristocracy, mystery, superiority: "Let man be democratic; the artist must split himself off and remain an aristocrat" ("L'homme peut être démocrate, l'artiste se dédouble et doit rester aristocrate"; Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes II* 362).

As the present seems to offer the poet no prospects but surrender to commercialism or neglect, even persecution, by the public, Mallarmé explores in essays such as "An interrupted spectacle" ("Un Spectacle interrompu") the possibilities for overcoming the unacceptable alternatives of a return to the outmoded forms of the past or submission to the dictates of the market. Perhaps performance: dance, theater, music offer ways of suggesting fleeting impressions, of capturing the evanescent Idea. But the poet, unlike these other creators, cannot avoid the question of language, which he is forced to share with the masses. Paul Bénichou notes Mallarmé's lament that poetry does not have its own typography, which would allow its distinction to be manifest (16). Like money, ordinary language establishes the radical equivalence of all the banalized objects of linguistic exchange (Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes II* 212).

How then to take language "out of circulation"? Can it be re-forged to communicate something other than the materialistic concerns of daily life? Can it offer the one means of transcendence in a contingent world? The assertion of the ambiguity or "double nature" of language — to draw on its etymological origin — was the precondition of Mallarmé's destruction of the conventional forms of everyday language in order to release its potential for spiritual liberation, to render it fit to become the means of exploring the ineffable Ideal, of capturing a glimpse of the realm of absolute necessity beyond the contingent. Accusations of obscurity and hermeticism made against the Symbolists at the time by their critics missed the point: the Symbolists declared they could not use the transparent, universally-understood comparisons, lexis, and syntax of daily intercourse. That would be to betray their intention of evoking the mysteries that lay behind and beyond the reach of prosaic transactions: "whereas traditional doctrines of language wagered on the correspondence between words and things, Mallarmé theorised their incommensurability" (Wolin 212). Language must be liberated from its role in the economy of exchange through the use of esoteric language and pleonasm, of unusual comparisons which confounded the distinctions conventionally made between the senses (Baudelaire's "correspondances"), and disjointed syntax. The reader would have to make an effort in order to follow the poet into this universe of fleeting impressions. And perhaps many ordinary readers would not make the effort: Mallarmé was fully aware of this likely response, indeed welcomed it as evidence of the refinement of his art, declaring: "if someone of average intelligence, and of insufficient literary training, chances to open a book written in this way, and claims to appreciate it, there is a misunderstanding" ("si un être d'une intelligence moyenne, et d'une préparation littéraire insuffisante, ouvre par hasard un livre ainsi fait et prétend en jouir, il y a malentendu"). The poet, he continues, is "on strike against society" ("en grève devant la société"): he must refuse the "corrupted tools" ("moyens viciés") which such a society offers him and which are necessarily inferior to his own understanding of his spiritual task (*Œuvres complètes II* 700). Some contemporary critics, for example Hélène Stafford in *Mallarmé and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, have tried to make the case that Mallarmé's poetry is not as esoteric and difficult as it is reputed to be. Whatever the merits of their arguments, which cannot be discussed in this article, these critics also miss the point: whether or not Mallarmé succeeded in stripping language of its conventional meanings, his intention was certainly to combat, through the purification and spiritualization of language, the banalization of taste incarnated in the formulaic productions aimed at the masses.

The centrality of language to Mallarmé's thinking and creative endeavour is demonstrated not only by the many reflections in his prose poems and occasional pieces on the economy of linguistic exchange, but by the more theoretical considerations undertaken throughout his life in view of a possible "Traité sur le langage" — never completed — which are brought together in *Œuvres complètes I* under the heading "Notes sur le langage" (*Œuvres complètes I* 503-12). Here — influenced by Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* — he explores the possibility of applying Science to Language, of "language

reflecting on itself" ("le langage se réfléchissant" [*Œuvres complètes I* 504]). But he does not interpret Descartes in the conventional way as the representative of a rigorously objective approach: he believes that Descartes has been misunderstood, particularly by "foreigners," notably by the English and particularly the Germans, who have used his work to justify a "hyper-scientific movement" ("mouvement hyper-scientifique") of pure science (Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes I* 505). Mallarmé, on the contrary, sees in Descartes the argument that language makes possible fiction and fiction is at the root of all mental activity: "fiction seems to him [to Descartes] to be the basic process of the human mind — it is that which puts all method into play, and man is reduced to will" ("la fiction lui semble être le procédé même de l'esprit humain — c'est elle qui met en jeu toute méthode, et l'homme est réduit à la volonté" [*Œuvres complètes I* 504]). His claim that the very possibility of the activity of the human spirit springs from fiction or imagination, gives back to the creator the priority and privilege of representing the true nature of the human mind. Only the poet is able to explore "what the spirit is in relation to its double expression of matter and humanity, and how our world can attach itself to the Absolute" ("ce qu'est l'esprit par rapport à sa double expression de la matière et de l'humanité, et comment notre monde peut se rattacher à l'Absolu" [*Œuvres complètes I* 507-08]). He theorizes a fundamental distinction between Language, which is the daily physical manifestation of language in speech and writing, and "le Verbe" which exists beyond Language, which is "adequate to Time and the Idea" ("adéquat au Temps et à l'Idée"), that is to say, to Eternity and the Ideal (*Œuvres complètes I* 506).

Mallarmé seeks to provide in these scattered and partial notes, then, the epistemological underpinnings for what Richard Terdiman describes as the "counter-discourse" of the nineteenth century. For Terdiman the attempts by avant-garde writers to maintain a counter-discourse — however contradictory, unsuccessful, or partial — are ultimately to be celebrated for their "symbolic resistance" to the overwhelming power of the market economy and the hegemony of exchange value. In his conclusion Terdiman writes: "Its horizon [that of counter-discourse] — in Mallarmé's period as in our own — is the plenitude and the cultural richness of a freer discursive economy, in which something more like authentic democracy might prevail" (343). As does Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art*, Terdiman attributes heroic qualities to those who resisted the dominant discourses, carving out, in Bourdieu's terms, a quasi autonomous space within which freedom, independence of thought, and therefore *engagement* become possible. However we should also consider what may have been lost or distorted in this encounter. As Bourdieu and Carey show, the counter-discourse is constituted as the negative pole of the forms of expression dominant in the field of mass production. It cannot avoid being over-determined by the necessity to construct itself in opposition. But what is its opposite? And how have the terms of the polarity been defined, indeed constructed?

I suggest at the beginning of this article, following Carey, that the term "the masses" is a simplification and a reification, which hides and misleads as much as it reveals. The same generalizing and homogenizing references to the masses can be found in Mallarmé's work, where the banality of bourgeois taste exemplified at the theatre (*Œuvres complètes II* 90-92) and the incomprehension of the pathetic crowd of exhausted workers before a representation of beauty (*Œuvres complètes II* 83-84) are encompassed within his sweeping condemnation. I use the term reification in the sense that a human and social relationship, that existing between the avant-garde and the social majority, is denied, and the latter is reduced to an abstract category with which to conceptualise difference. It can further be argued that the notion of a dominant, unitary, hegemonic discourse — said to belong to the masses — is a fiction, a simplification, and a reification: a reification because language is considered as the unitary expression of abstract forces such as rationality, utility, materialism rather than as the tool of diverse social agents.

The characteristics attributed by the avant-garde to a hypostasised "dominant discourse" are thus the basis for the projection/creation of a series of binary opposites and mutually exclusive terms: materialism and idealism, science and creation, utility and imagination, plenitude and nothingness, *langage* and *verbe*, polarities which made possible their own activity and legitimated their distinction. Ironically, in view of the influence that the Symbolist program was to exercise in the construction of the twentieth century's radical suspicion of Western thought and its binary categories, it is a move which installs duality at the heart of language and bestows authentic existence on the poles thus created. This move makes possible the attribution to literary language of the capacity to represent a

higher plane of human activity, a sphere of pure thought, of essences which exist because they have been founded on the negation of existence: "Suddenly, literary language incarnated a type of pure negativity: like Plato's Ideas, it inhabited a superior ontological plane" (Wolin 212). This purified language offers, it is claimed, the only means of evoking transcendence in the vacuum left by the death of God. And yet no metaphysical basis can be furnished for the power attributed to this ideal language other than the assertions of its practitioners who, by capitalizing notions such as the Idea, Nothingness, and the Absolute, declare, through naming, the existence of what is to be proven (and which Mallarmé discovered, in his failure to write *The Book*, would prove, in his case at least, to be elusive).

In conclusion, I suggest that we witness in the series of antinomies ascribed to language a displacement onto the epistemological and philosophical levels of the problematic relationship of the artist to contemporary society, designated as "the masses." The "double nature" of language is less a discovery of the nineteenth-century avant-garde than a stake in their struggle over the control of culture within an artistic field split between the fields of the masses and restricted production. The assertion of the essential ambiguity of language opens up a space for creation and interpretation to which the specialist — writer, critic, scholar — has privileged, perhaps exclusive access: this claim underpins their deontology, the professional ideology which legitimates their activity. But it has metaphysical implications too, since the search by the poet, using the incantatory power of a language cleansed of its utilitarian trappings accords to absence a priority over presence and thus identifies as a "problem" the metaphysics of presence of which Western thought can and will henceforth stand accused.

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