

PERFORMING OBJECTS: ON THE VERBAL MAKING OF THINGS

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The nineteenth century witnesses a slow and surreptitious shift from a mimetic conception of literature to its performative conception. Especially around 1850, artists seem to become less and less interested in expressing something in literature rather than in creating something as literature. It is precisely this move from (mimetic) world-making to (performative) text-making that turns the artist into a “modern” artist (Baudelaire), liberating him/her from the constraints of ‘reality’ and endowing him/her with the options of exploring art’s medialities. The article proceeds from what is called the “thing-poem” (Dinggedicht), trying to show its twofold nature – both as an artefact depicting an object and as a composition making one. Then it moves backward to explore the constructive mechanisms of textuality with regard to the Parnassian movement (and even John Keats’s poetry), as well as forward to show how later generations engage with ‘things’ not so much in order to represent but rather to present them. Finally, a similar development is traced in narratives, which develop from the mimeticism of descriptions to the foregrounding of the performative qualities of prose. This, however, includes a much greater risk of falling prey to the recuperating attempts to reintegrate the text-making into a conventionalized mimetic reading, expecting, and finding, a fragmented and contingent, ‘absurd’ world.

Dirt into Gold

“Paris!” exclaims the nineteenth-century French *poète maudit* Charles Baudelaire in a sketch for an epilogue to the enlarged 1861 re-edition of his collection of poems entitled *Les Fleurs du mal*, “you have given me your dirt, and I have made

gold of it" ("Paris, tu m'as donné ta boue, et j'en ai fait de l'or").¹ My focus in the following will be on the word "made." In ancient Greek, its equivalent is, as everybody knows, the word *poein*. The intransigent early modern classicist Ben Jonson insisted on calling himself, not a "poet," but "the maker." Accordingly, a "poetics" is the description of a "making." What Baudelaire's exclamation is celebrating, is its author's creativity; what, in his view, the contemporary Paris is giving him, is nothing but "dirt," "ugliness," "corruption," and for him, it is the poet's task to turn this into "gold" – to make something "beautiful" out of it, to produce with this things, nothing but things aesthetic.

According to Baudelaire, this is precisely the role of the "contemporary" artist. It describes the function of the poet as what he terms a "peintre de la vie moderne" (a painter of modern life). What the city (seemingly) referentially endows him with ("le mal," – the evil), this "painter" aesthetically transforms into almost nature-like, beautiful objects (into "fleurs" – flowers). Instead of mimetically *re-presenting* the 1850s (urban, industrial) ugliness of the French capital, this 'painting' poet creates, right in front of our eyes and with the help of words, the 'flower' of a verbal work of art. In other words, his intention is to form beauty. In the strict sense of the word (as I will try to explicate later), he 'per-forms' it, and, in doing so, he *presents* it as something that exists only in and through the text.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples for this surreptitious but distinct 'modernist'/'modernizing' shift away from a world-oriented mimesis to a text-based performance is poem nr. XXIX in the first section of *Les Fleurs du mal*, "Spleen et idéal" (Spleen and Ideal) entitled "Une charogne" (A Rotting Carcass). It begins like this:

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.²

¹ For the sketch see Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., vol. 1, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 191ff; the quoted text is on p. 192. All translations from the Baudelaire poem are by the author.

² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal et autres poèmes* (The Flowers of Evil and Other Poems) (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1975) 57, ll. 1-8; for a much more detailed reading

The speaker of the poem, *flâneur* through the Parisian landscape,³ at first sight seems to address his own soul (“mon âme”) and asks her to remember a situation when, turning a corner (“Au détour d’un sentier”), they suddenly saw (“nous vîmes”), one mild summer morning (“Ce beau matin d’été si doux”), this horrible object (“une charogne infâme”) in all its obscenity (“Les jambes en l’air, comme une femme lubrique”), its ugliness (“brûlante et suant les poisons”), its negativity (“Son ventre plein d’exhalaisons”).⁴ At the same time, however, the poem itself, even in the first two of its twelve stanzas, resorts to a rather exquisite and ‘beautiful’ language. Verbally positivizing the negativity of its object,⁵ it makes use of rhetorical ornate (e.g., the apostrophe “mon âme”), it indulges in a highly complex syntax (the hyperbaton pushing the central verb “ouvrait” to as late as line 7), and it seems to revel in a very select and rare vocabulary (“infâme,” “lubrique,” “nonchalante et cynique,” “exhalaisons”). What at first sight appears as if it were an ugly real-life object really/realistically “seen” in the streets of Paris, slowly but steadily turns out to be an exquisite and rare object of verbal construction, reached and produced through a meticulous and extremely self-conscious choice and composition of words. What Baudelaire thus seems to be doing is to put up the (textual) ‘beauty’ of the carcass right in front of our eyes. Instead of mimetically describing the object, he textually performs it. He builds it out of language. Metaphorically speaking, he ‘paints’ it with words on a white sheet of paper, constructing a striking specimen of precisely that *vie moderne*: of modern urban life (with Paris as its undoubted nineteenth-century capital).⁶

of the poem see Horst Weich, *Paris en vers: Aspekte der Beschreibung und semantischen Fixierung von Paris in der französischen Lyrik der Moderne* (Paris in Verse: Aspects of Description and Semantic Fixation of Paris in Modern French Lyrical Poetry) (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998) 49ff.

³ For the topos of the *flâneur* see Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973) 35ff.

⁴ For a history of odour and stench in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Paris see Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille: L’odorat et l’imaginaire social XVII^e-XIX^e siècles* (Miasma and Narcissus: Smell and the Social Imaginary in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries) (Paris: Flammarion, 1986). For the cultural significance as well as productivity specifically of dirt in Victorian England see Sabine Schülting, *Dirt in Victorian Literature: Writing Materiality* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ For the aesthetic as a field for the (re-including) positivization of a socially, morally or politically excluded negativity, see the discussion in my “Disciplining Relevance: On Manifest and Latent Functions of Narratives,” in *Relevance and Narrative Research*, ed. Matei Chihaia and Katharina Rennhak (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019) 19-33, especially 25ff.

⁶ For Paris as the cultural centre of the nineteenth-century aesthetic debate see Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); cf.

So, instead of depicting a momentary Parisian event in the speaker-*flâneur*'s life, the poem first posits an element of *choc*⁷ – the eponymous “charogne” – only to display⁸ and, as it were, ‘wallow’ in it by metonymically extending, and celebrating, it *via* “cette pourriture” (this rottenness, l. 9), the already ambivalent “carcasse superbe” (the superb – if not sublime – carcass, l. 13), which begins to open up precisely “like a flower” (“Comme une fleur,” l. 14), with its “putrefying stomach” (“ventre putride,” l. 17) and its “living rags” (“vivants haillons,” l. 20), which leads to an overall synaesthetic experience of stench: both like “a strange music” (“une étrange musique,” l. 25) and as a dream-like visuality (“rêve,” l. 29), presenting itself like a sketch on a canvas – whilst at the same time a dog is jealously, and seemingly ‘realistically’ again, watching the “skeleton” (“squelette,” l. 35), because she is interested in a piece of meat that she had already reserved for herself, before the urban *flâneur*-observer arrived (ll. 33-36).

The last three stanzas, after a dash, sum up the alleged experience. What at first sight looked like a self-address (“mon âme”), now seems to be directed towards the speaker’s lover, who in several further apostrophes – “Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature / Vous, mon ange et ma passion!” (Star of my eyes, sun of my being / You, my angel and my passion, ll. 39-40); “ô la reine des grâces” (queen of the Graces, l. 41); “ô ma beauté!” (my beauty, l. 45) – is sketched as a beautiful young woman who is warned by the speaker that her youth and life will be short: “Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure” (And you will be like this dirt, too, l. 37). What starts as a *memento mori* remembrance now turns into a *carpe diem* admonition, with the ‘thing’ described, or rather ‘made,’ serving as a kind of emblem in an act of exhortation and persuasion – but above all with the speaker himself as the form-giver, the poetic ‘maker,’ who, as the last four lines summarize, has “kept the form”: “Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine / Qui vous mangera de baisers, / Que j’ai gardé la forme, et l’essence divine / De mes amours décomposés!” (Then, my beauty, tell the worms / Who will devour you with kisses, / That I have kept the form and divine essence / Of my decomposed loves, ll. 45-48).

This seems to follow the traditional bipartite structure of the descriptive poem, with (1) a long descriptive part detailing the object (stanzas I-IX), followed by (2) a

also Karlheinz Stierle, *Der Mythos von Paris: Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt* (The Myth of Paris: Sign and Consciousness of the City) (Munich: dtv, 1998).

⁷ For the urban encounter as an experience of *choc* (shock) see Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 116-18, 125, 134.

⁸ For the literary text as a “display text,” showing and foregrounding, rather than referring and informing, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) 136ff.

much shorter speaker's comment (stanzas X-XII) evaluating the object in relation to him/herself. And yet, if description seems to imply mimesis, what we get is rather the textual 'creation' – "création imaginatrice"⁹ –, not of something pre-existent but of some kind of ugliness or 'horror' presently 'made' before us. What the poem seems to do is precisely (and programmatically) take a metonymical part of the Parisian "dirt" – the rotting carcass – to (rhythmically, metrically, verbally, rhetorically, semantically) make "gold" out of it: i.e., the poem itself is figuring as one of the "fleurs du mal" offered by the poet-maker, performatively produced in and through the text.

Parnassian 'Things'

Baudelaire's "Une charogne" can be seen as a prototype of what has (perhaps misleadingly) been called a "thing poem" or "object poem" (*Dinggedicht*).¹⁰ Object poems were extremely popular in the mid-nineteenth century, not only in France. In France, however, they were more often than not connected with a movement that called itself the Parnassians. I would propose to read Baudelaire's poem as a kind of inversion of the Parnassian project. Where the Parnassians chose extremely valuable, select objects and tried to transpose them into equally valuable, select language, Baudelaire seems to heighten the challenge by choosing the low, the mean, the repulsive, to prove his poetic skills.

And yet, as the analogy is apt to show, the Parnassians were already (positively) doing the same thing. Recent criticism has tried to make a case for seeing the Parnassian project rather as an a-mimetic than a mimetic one or, at least, *both* as a mimetic *and* an a-mimetic project at the same time, which means that what the Parnassians were producing were – in analogy to picture puzzles – rabbit-duck-like *text puzzles*, mimetically suggesting the representation of an

⁹ The term is Baudelaire's own, see his *Salon de 1859* and *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (The Painter of Modern Life), *Œuvres complètes* II, 608-82 (especially 619ff), and 683-724. For a discussion of this as a shift from the description of a "paysage urbaine" (an urban landscape) to the creation of a "ville mentale" (city of the mind) see Weich 151-53.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the thing poem see Wolfgang G. Müller, "Das Problem der Subjektivität der Lyrik und die Dichtung der Dinge und Orte" (The Problem of Subjectivity in Poetry and the Poetry of Things and Places), *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden: Eine Einführung* (Literary Theories, Models and Methods: An Introduction), ed. Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 1995) 93-105; cf. also Shimon Sandbank, "The Object Poem: In Defence of Referentiality," *Poetics Today*, 6 (1985): 461-73.

object, whilst already performatively, and textually, *presenting* it.¹¹ This can be seen in all those poems that seemingly describe or ‘bespeak’ an inanimate object such as a gem, a medal or an altermedial work of art, whilst at the same time making use of their very own verbal medium, not to merely depict but to construct this object in language. Théophile Gautier’s 1852 collection *Émaux et Camées* (Enamels and Gems) would be a case in point.¹² What the poems in the collection attempt to do is build textual gems, enamels, artefacts that do not so much simply reflect something valuable – albeit largely uninteresting or even banal – from their surrounding ‘reality,’ but that produce something valuable in their own right. Accordingly, it is not by accident that Baudelaire dedicated his *Fleurs du Mal* “au poète impeccable, au parfait magicien ès lettres françaises, à mon très cher et très vénéré maître et ami, Théophile Gautier [...]” (“to the impeccable poet, the perfect magician of French letters, to my beloved and revered master & friend Théophile Gautier [...]").¹³

Poetologically, the Parnassian object poem is characterized on the pragmatic level by a radical reduction of the enunciation, on the semantic level by strategies of what has been called a “rarefaction” of the enounced, and on the syntactic level by the iconic textual support of this rarefaction (*Rarefizierung*).¹⁴ In other words, there is practically no speaker; the object itself is foregrounded; it is endowed with extremely select lexematic items; and its rhetoricity and metrics are used to back

¹¹ For the a-mimetic aspect of Parnassian poetry see the contributions in *Jenseits der Mimesis: Parnassische transposition d’art und der Paradigmenwandel in der Lyrik des 19. Jahrhunderts* (The Other Side of Mimesis: The Parnassian *transposition d’art* and the Paradigm Change in Nineteenth-century Poetry), ed. Klaus W. Hempfer (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000); for the notion of the “text puzzle” see my “Sprache – Mimesis – Diskurs: Die Vexiertexte des Parnasse als Paradigma anti-mimetischer Sprachrevolution” (Language – Mimesis – Discourse: Parnassian Text Puzzles as a Paradigm of an Anti-mimetic Language Revolution), *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 116.1 (2006): 34-47. For the phenomenon of the rabbit-duck see E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1988) 4; it has to be pointed out, however, that if the rabbit-duck oscillates between two versions of the enounced, the “text puzzles” proposed here oscillate between two types of enunciation.

¹² See Théophile Gautier, *Émaux et Camées*, ed. Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

¹³ Baudelaire 31; the English translation follows Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal: The Complete Text of The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1983) 3.

¹⁴ See Klaus W. Hempfer, “Konstituenten Parnassischer Lyrik” (Constituents of Parnassian Poetry), *Romanische Lyrik: Dichtung und Poetik. Walter Pabst zu Ehren* (Poetry in Romance Languages: Poetry and Poetics. In Honour of Walter Pabst), ed. Titus Heydenreich, Eberhard Leube and Ludwig Schrader (Tübingen: Narr, 1993) 69-91, especially 84-87.

the verbal construction of the object as a complex and extremely rare verbal 'thing.' That this can be traced back to the impact of a Kantian aesthetic is not really a hidden secret. There is evidence that this shift from a mimetic representation to a performative making has its beginnings in France in poetological debates situated as early as in the 1820s or even the 1810s.¹⁵ One could even argue, as I have tried to do elsewhere, that a poem like John Keats's "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" from 1817 can be read as an a-mimetic intermedial transposition – a *transposition d'art* – from architecture to textuality in that it is not so much concerned with the mimetic depiction of the fragmentary freeze and its faithful description (about which we learn practically nothing) but rather with a performative textual (re)building of the freeze precisely through dashes, gaps, run-on lines and a fragmentary syntax.¹⁶ One might even go further and say that mimesis, or at least the Classicist variety of mimesis, characteristic of the literary practices prevalent in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, is the one effect of performativity that tries to completely obliterate its performative base by explicitly and programmatically denying the fact that art must be made before it can be, which would be the (at the time) widespread principle of *celare artem* (concealing art), or of medial transparency.¹⁷

¹⁵ For the aesthetic debate as well as the reference back to Kant see Stefan Hartung, "Victor Cousins ästhetische Theorie: Eine nur relative Autonomie des Schönen und ihre Rezeption durch Baudelaire" (The Aesthetic Theory of Victor Cousin: A Mere Relative Autonomy of the Beautiful and Its Reception by Baudelaire), *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 107.3 (1997): 173-213.

¹⁶ See my "John Keats und der Parnasse: Versuch einer intermedialen Lektüre der 'Elgin Marbles' als medienkomparatistische *transposition d'art*" (John Keats and Parnassism: An Attempt at an Intermedial Reading of "Elgin Marbles" as a Media-Comparative *transposition d'art*), *Medienkomparatistik*, 1 (2019): 135-48; for the distinction between what he wants to see as the a-mimetic phenomenon of the *transposition d'art* and the rather traditional mimetic phenomena of ekphrasis and pictorialism see Klaus W. Hempfer, "Transposition d'art und die Problematisierung der Mimesis in der Parnasse-Lyrik" (*Transposition d'art* and the Problematicization of Mimesis in Parnassian Poetry), *Frankreich an der Freien Universität Berlin: Geschichte und Aktualität* (France at Freie Universität Berlin: Past and Present), ed. Winfried Engler (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997) 177-96.

¹⁷ For the distinction between "mimesis" and "performance" I draw on the pertinent remarks in Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 247-303.

Acts of 'Per-forming'

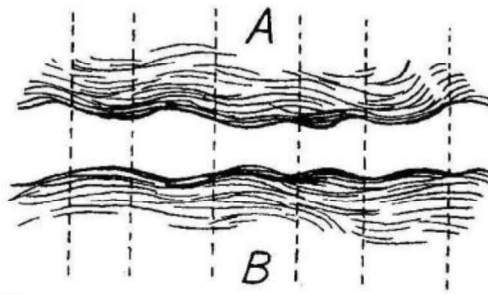
This seems to pose – again, and perhaps with renewed vigour – the question of the performative. As stated in the introduction to this issue, purely speech act-based concepts of the performative as well as their mere philosophical deconstructions nowadays seem to have become slightly superseded. One could add that the same applies to predominantly theatre-based notions that largely tend to regard the performative as the putting of something into practice, its “staging” or “enactment.” Considering its general nature – which becomes apparent in the fact that, as I have indicated above, though it looks like being in a symmetrical opposition to the mimetic, it even seems to underpin the mimetic itself – one could argue that the performative is something much more radical in the sense that it should be treated like a general principle of unrest, some kind of (medial or media-based) ‘motor,’ or potential ‘trigger,’ perpetually driving what one could call (human) creativity, making emerge things hitherto inexistent and unknown and, in doing so, enlarging and modifying the world. Let me briefly follow that line.¹⁸

Etymologically, the origins of the term “perform” seem to be shrouded in mystery and legend. The first edition of the *OED* almost exclusively tried to trace it back to Old French *parfournir* (to deliver) or, despite the “m” perhaps less likely, to a rare verb *parfourmer* (of rather dubious standing). The second edition from 1989 significantly added to this the option of seeing it as a combination of the prefix *per-* in its second meaning: “Through and through, thoroughly, completely, to completion, to the end,” and also even in its (adverb-based) forth: “thoroughly, perfectly, extremely, very,” plus the verb *former*, which it glosses as “1.a/c To give [a specified] form or shape to” and “4.a To construct, frame; to make, bring into existence, produce.” It is in this sense that “to perform” would refer to some kind of a *thorough process of forming something (spatially) through and through, and then (temporally) again and again*. It would refer to a process of “making” in the (spatial) sense of “2.a To finish making, complete the construction of [a material object or structure],” and to its (temporal) corroboration through acting in the sense of “6.a To carry out, achieve, accomplish, execute [...]; to go through and finish, to work out, make, do.”

¹⁸ For this chapter I take up some ideas that I have discussed previously in “Performanz: Spielraum des Bedeutens” (Performance: Playground of Meaning), *Theatralität und Räumlichkeit: Raumordnungen und Raumpraktiken im theatralen Mediendispositiv* (Theatricality and Spatiality: Orders and Practices of Space in the Theatrical Medium), ed. Jörg Dünne, Sabine Friedrich and Kirsten Kramer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009) 235-50.

To my mind, this looks extremely similar to what the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, too, has called “form.”¹⁹ In his seminal conceptualization of the sign, Saussure proposes to see the semiotic unit, not so much as a binary, but as a ternary relation bringing together what he calls the “swirling cloud[s]” of (1) indistinct materiality on the one hand, and (2) indistinct ideas on the other, plus as its third (3) a “form”-giving cut that in, as he terms it, “a somewhat mysterious process,”²⁰ *simultaneously* divides – and as such ‘per-forms’ in the sense of giving “form” to both sides – *both* swirling clouds, creating (or, as for that, making ‘emerge’ again) a distinct relation between the two, which results from the cut only. This is the birth of the “sign” or “word” – of what Saussure calls the “thought-sound” (“pensée-son”); it indicates the basic semiotic principle of differentiability.

According to de Saussure, “language” is a “series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (A), and on the equally featureless plane of sound (B),”²¹ as can be seen in his own illustration of what one – in the sense sketched above – could call the ‘per-formation’ of the two planes:



He also famously compares this to the cutting of a sheet of paper with its two sides (*recto* and *verso*) involved:

A language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet [*recto*: A] and sound the reverse side [*verso*: B]. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound. To separate the two for

¹⁹ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2009) 111, 120.

²⁰ de Saussure 111.

²¹ de Saussure 110, 111 (the illustration).

theoretical purposes takes us into either pure psychology or pure phonetics, not linguistics.²²

And he concludes from this: "Linguistics" – and one could add to this "language" – "then, operates along this margin, where sound and thought meet. *The contact between them gives rise to a form, not a substance.*"²³

In light of this, language definitely must be seen as a ternary, bringing together an amorphous substance (sound), confused ideas (thought), and a cut 'forming'/ 'per-forming' arbitrary, but distinct – distinct, but arbitrary – units that can be used as signs for something else: the semiotic (material) 'something' (B) for an (idealistic, immaterial) 'something' (A) in the sense of *aliquid stat pro aliquo*. In other words, what the performative, form-giving cut does can be conceived of as a tentative proposal of a 'token' in the sense of a sign not yet quite ratified as (re-usable) sign – the suggestion of a potential (spatial) correlation that will then have to be ratified by (temporal, corroborating) use into what will eventually become a conventionalized 'type.'²⁴ I would suggest, perhaps rather idiosyncratically, to use for the former – the spatial cut – the term "performance," and for the latter – the processes of lexicalization and institutionalization – the term "performativity."²⁵ So what the performance of the cut offers is a (unique) token with the potential of turning, through continuous performativity, into a (generalized, re-usable) type. The overall important thing in all this, however, seems to be the idea of the "margin," or what Saussure himself terms language's characteristic of being – of working – as an "intermediary,"²⁶ an asymptote, a gap, a threshold, an interstice or, as for that, an interface. Language happens (wave-like) "along the margin," not because it forms itself by *transforming* (pre-existent) thought into matter or, as for that, (pre-existent) matter into thought, but because it (co-emergently) "takes

²² de Saussure 111 (the terms "*recto*" and "*verso*" as used in the French original have been added for the sake of the argument).

²³ de Saussure 111, cf. 120.

²⁴ For the "type-token relation" in linguistics see the entry in Hadumod Bussmann, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, ed. and trans. Gregory P. Trauth and Kerstin Kazzazi (London: Routledge, 1996) 1237.

²⁵ For the first suggestion of this distinction see Mahler, "Perfomanz" 239; for the discussion of the linguistic processes of "lexicalization" and "institutionalization" see Leonhard Lipka, "Lexicalization and Institutionalization in English and German; Or Piefke, Wendehals, smog, perestroika, AIDS etc.," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 40.1 (1992): 101-11.

²⁶ de Saussure 111.

shape with its linguistic units *in between* those two amorphous masses.”²⁷ In other words, it captures the imaginary by giving it some (real) material with which it can be signified.

Another example for this “mysterious” in-between emergence of a “form” suddenly apt to signify would be the relation between (syntactic) “map” and (semantic) “territory.”²⁸ The map is not pre-existent to the territory, nor is the territory pre-existent to the map (England and Wales are not where they are because a map has placed them there, nor would it be easy to find out exactly where England turns into Wales without a map in hand). Both, map *and* territory, emerge through a forming act that simultaneously cuts the geographical land *and* determines the imagined territory-bound communities. In this way, a territory-making map turns out to be something like a (useful, pragmatic) “fiction.”

In trying to overcome the simple binary between “fiction” (seemingly) on the one hand and “reality” (seemingly) on the other, the German literary anthropologist Wolfgang Iser has famously proposed to see what he calls the fictionalizing act as one that also operates precisely “on a margin” in the sense that it draws on known realities in order to express an otherwise indistinct imaginary:

Undoubtedly, the text is permeated by a vast range of identifiable terms, selected from social and other extratextual realities. The mere importation into the text, however, of such realities – even though they are not represented in the text for their own sake – does not ipso facto make them fictive. Instead, the text’s apparent reproduction of items within the fictional text brings to light purposes, attitudes, and experiences that are decidedly *not* part of the reality reproduced. Hence they appear in the text as products of a fictionalizing act. Because this act of fictionalizing cannot be deduced from the reality repeated in the text, it clearly brings into play an imaginary quality that does not belong to the reality reproduced in the text but that cannot be disentangled from it. Thus the fictionalizing act converts the reality reproduced into a sign, simultaneously casting the imaginary as a form that allows us to conceive what it is toward which the sign points.²⁹

²⁷ de Saussure 111, emphasis added.

²⁸ For the “map-territory relation,” with reference to previous work done by Alfred Korzybski and Gregory Bateson, see Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 247-50.

²⁹ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 2.

It is precisely this “casting of the imaginary as a form” which links his (triad-based) theory – of making emerge in fiction something ‘new’ through a use of the ‘known’ – to the form-giving process of signification as described by Saussure. Just as a map “converts the reality” – of the countryside – “reproduced into a sign, simultaneously casting the imaginary” (of its territories) “as a form that allows us to conceive what it is toward which the sign points” (this is England, this is Wales), the sign itself, in its performative emergence, “converts” realities surrounding us, “casting” our imaginary “as a form that allows us to conceive what it is toward which [it] points”: this is the birth of (cognitively) understanding the semiotic.³⁰

My contention is that this is the mechanism with which we are continuously constructing our culture as what has been called either the “semiosphere” or our “artificially built habitat.”³¹ As “meaning-generating”³² animals, our understanding is – not exclusively, of course, but decisively – based on a linguistic/semiotic medium apt to “cast” our (indistinct) imaginary as a (distinct) “form.” In a way, this is how we construct our (human) societies: precisely by “casting [...] as a form” (by drawing into a “gestalt”) our imaginaries so as to produce a “fiction”³³ – a semantic entity – apt to “reify” into what we (then) collectively and conventionally agree on to regard as our “reality.”³⁴ In other words, our

³⁰ For a discussion of our faculty of understanding the semiotic as an arbitrary but efficient tool to (cognitively) represent to us, and communicate to others, what would otherwise remain diffuse and indistinct, see, with reference to Lacan’s concept of what he has famously called the “mirror stage,” my “Semiosphäre und kognitive Matrix: Anthropologische Thesen” (On the Semiosphere and the Cognitive Matrix: Anthropological Theses) *Von Pilgerwegen, Schriftspuren und Blickpunkten: Raumpraktiken in medienhistorischer Perspektive* (On Pilgrim Routes, Traces of Writing and Viewpoints: Spatial Practices as Seen from a Media-historical Perspective), ed. Jörg Dünne, Hermann Doetsch and Roger Lüdeke (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004) 57-69.

³¹ For the notion of the “semiosphere” see Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 123-215. For the concept of culture as an “artificially built habitat” see Wolfgang Iser, “Modes of Emergence,” *Aesthetic Transgression: Modernity, Liberalism, and the Function of Literature*, ed. Thomas Claviez, Ulla Haselstein and Sieglinde Lemke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006) 25-28; cf. also Iser’s posthumous book *Emergenz: Nachgelassene und verstreut publizierte Essays* (Emergence: Posthumous and Uncollected Essays), ed. Alexander Schmitz (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2013).

³² For a detailed discussion of meaning-generating see Lotman 11-119.

³³ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 3.

³⁴ For the idea of “reification” see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) 106-109; for the suggestion that our cultural reality is the particular fiction that we

communicative, our mutual, understanding of the world is fundamentally based on an “as if,”³⁵ its driving motor being our faculty of effectuating what I have proposed to call “performance.”

Making Things in Poetry

Once a sign has been formed, it can be used in a twofold way. According to its temporality, it can be used, as it were, ‘anaphorically’ as referring to something given, or ‘kataphorically’ with reference to something still to come.³⁶ “Didst thou ever see a white bear?” Tristram Shandy’s father famously asks Corporal Trim, and when the corporal declines, he continues, “But thou couldst discourse about one, Trim, said my father, in case of need?”³⁷ Wolfgang Iser has theorized this phenomenon under the label of what he calls a “split signifier”:³⁸ according to him, the sign either “imitates” what is already there or “symbolizes” what has not yet come into being.³⁹ In other words, in the act of imitation, the *recto* seems to precede

collectively and communicatively agree upon to treat “as if” it were a reality see my “Konstruktion / Gegen / Konstruktion: Über das Imaginäre als Vermögen und als Funktion” (Construction / Counter / Construction: On the Imaginary as a Capacity and as a Function), *Comparatio*, 6 (2014): 87-101.

³⁵ For a profound discussion of the uses of “fiction,” the “as if,” for the negotiation of “realities” see the seminal work by Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob: System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus. Mit einem Anhang über Kant und Nietzsche* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1922); cf. also the English version *The Philosophy of “As If”: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1984). For a pertinent discussion of Vaihinger’s position in light of productive misconceptions above all from the side of literary studies see Anita Traninger, “Hans Vaihingers Philosophie des Als Ob und die literaturwissenschaftliche Fiktionalitätstheorie: Stationen produktiven Missverstehens” (Hans Vaihinger’s Philosophy of the “As-if” and the Literary Theory of Fictionality: Stages of Productive Misunderstandings), *Im Zeichen der Fiktion: Aspekte fiktionaler Rede aus historischer und systematischer Sicht* (Under the Sign of Fiction: Aspects of Fictional Utterance in Historical and Theoretical Perspective), ed. Irina O. Rajewsky and Ulrike Schneider (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2008) 45-65.

³⁶ For “anaphora” and “cataphora” see Bussmann 58-59, 162. I prefer the writing of the latter term with a “k”: “kataphora.”

³⁷ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 396.

³⁸ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 248.

³⁹ For the textual interplay between “imitation” and “symbolization” see Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 247-54, where he also points out that one of the main consequences of

the *verso*, whereas in the act of symbolization the *verso* seems to precede the *recto* (as its effect).

This difference between imitation and symbolization brings us back to Baudelaire and the Parnassians. Baudelaire's "Charogne" poem pretends to be imitating a (pre-existent) real-life event in Baudelaire's contemporary Paris, whilst at the same time it is symbolizing, i.e., 'creating,' a textual event that happens, above all, on the page. This is its "rabbit-duck"-like quality – or its value as a "text puzzle": (seemingly) mimetically reproducing something real from outside, it also and above all performatively produces its object in and through language and, in doing so, it "converts" the seeming reality reproduced, and "casts" Baudelaire's imaginary into a "form," with which he attempts to make us see what is not. In (fictionalizingly) using a known *recto* for the creation of a *verso*, he at the same time creates a new *recto* through this *verso*; in cutting through both "swirling clouds," he 'per-forms' a unique, imaginary carcass in a real, known Paris (and the same procedure could be shown for any Parnassian poem, too). The textual artefact, then, looks like a token – something like an *ad hoc* token – of a unique type or, if one likes, linguistically speaking, like a "cranberry"-type (one could also call it a 'semiotic unicorn').⁴⁰ In this sense, the aesthetic artefact is a sign for something that exists only once, in and through the artefact itself. This is what the generations of poets after Baudelaire and the Parnassians set out to explore; it gives us an idea of what I would like to call "aesthetic performance."

In an essay reflecting on the curious fact that the emperor who erected the Chinese wall was the same as the one who burnt all books, the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges tries to see both acts of destruction *and* construction as the two sides of the same coin, and he concludes:

The solid wall, which in this moment as in all moments projects its system of shadows on territories I will never see, is the shadow of an emperor who gave commands that the most honourable of all nations burn its past; it is most likely that this idea moves us in itself, beyond all speculations that it might conjure up. (Its specificity possibly lies in the contradiction between an act of construction and an act of destruction, both on a huge scale.) One

this "splitting" of the signifier lies in the (creative) fact that "the linguistic sign is now freed for unpremeditated uses" (247).

⁴⁰ Bussmann identifies the "cranberry morph/morpheme" (263, 500, 768, 965, 1052), whose "original meaning can no longer be analyzed synchronically, as, e.g., *cran-*, in *cranberry*" (vs. e.g., *huckleberry*) with "semi-morpheme" (1052) and "pseudomorpheme" (965), and finally with the *hapax legomenon*: "Linguistic expression with only one attested occurrence and whose meaning is often, therefore, difficult to ascertain" (500).

could generally conclude from this that in principle *all* forms carry their specificity in themselves, and not in some speculative ‘content’. This would be in accord with what Benedetto Croce has proposed; earlier than that, Pater in 1877 was of the opinion that all arts strive towards the condition of music, which in his view is nothing but form. Music, moments of happiness, myths, time-worn faces, specific types of sunsets, want to tell us something or have told us something already that we should not have lost, or are about to tell us something; this imminence of a revelation that never comes is, perhaps, the aesthetic.⁴¹

What Borges here proposes is to see the coincidence of a huge destruction and a huge construction, not as something to be interpreted semantically by endowing it with “speculations” or “some speculative ‘content,’” but as something “in itself” – as a “form,” again: a momentary ‘cut,’ a suggestive structure evoking something that cannot be reduced to a simple signified (as in the anecdote of the ballet dancer who, being asked what her dance means, exasperatedly gives the answer: “If I could say it in so many words, do you think I should take the very great trouble of dancing it?”⁴²).

Like “music,” “moments of happiness,” “myths,” “time-worn faces,” certain “sunsets” or, as for that, dances, coincidences like the one of the wall and the books seem to tell us “something” that cannot be explicated in semantic terms – that cannot be reduced to “content” or meaning – precisely because they involve *both* sides of the phenomenon, signified *and* signifier, *recto and verso*, and cannot be reduced to one side only. In other words, the aesthetic seems to be the site that quite evidently faces the performative *process* – whereas any ordinary/transactional/interactional language use (and quite rightly so) fetishizes the (referential, the mimetic) *result*. The processuality of this process precisely seems to lie in the fact that it (simultaneously) takes account of *both* sides of the “form” at stake by leaping, again and again, over the “margin,” by oscillating “in between” the two sides, between the *verso* and the *recto*, between imitation and symbolization, mimesis (as unacknowledged performance) and performance (as acknowledged performance), suggesting a “revelation” without ever reaching any definitive

⁴¹ “[E]sta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético;” Jorge Luis Borges, “La muralla y los libros” (The Wall and the Books), *Prosa completa*, ed. Carlos V. Frías, 3 vols. (Barcelona: Bruguera 1980) 2:133, the quote 133 (the author’s translation).

⁴² I owe the anecdote to Richard Hughes, “Introduction,” William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 7.

conclusion. Its overall effect looks very much like what has been called a “differential epiphany.”⁴³

Wolfgang Iser has discussed this as a “tilting game” between signifier and signified.⁴⁴ It is a game where the “form” has not yet become institutionalized – and, hence, hidden – but is still openly visible and in flux; it is in the process of being “formed,” ‘per-formed,’ as it were. In this sense, Baudelaire’s “Charogne” performs a carcass just as much as Gautier’s “Émaux et camées” perform “enamels and gems” or John Keats’s “Elgin Marbles” poem performs a fragmented freeze. They verbally ‘make’ the object they talk about; they do not just depict it, they create, they ‘con-struct’ it.

Modernism, as everybody knows, will largely follow this track. In Mallarmé’s notorious “Sonnet en X” (“Sonnet en yx”; “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même”), e.g., the reader becomes witness of the making of something valuable through the use, in rhyme, of rare words such as “onyx,” “Phénix,” “ptyx,” “Styx” along with “lampadophore,” “amphore,” “sonore” and the conspicuously homophonous “s’honore,” which in the end precisely lead up to the “gold” again (“or”) that we already know from Baudelaire.⁴⁵ So what the poem does is not only perform the

⁴³ For the development of the notion of a “differential epiphany,” with reference to the Borgesian quote, see Rainer Warning, *Heterotopien als Räume ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Heterotopias as Spaces of Aesthetic Experience) (München: Fink, 2009) 23ff.

⁴⁴ See Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 250-57, for an attempt to concretize the tilt into describing it, with reference to Saussurean terminology, either as a ‘*verso-recto* game’ or as a ‘*recto-verso* game’ (or preferably as both). Cf. my “Towards a Pragmasemiotics of Poetry,” *Poetica*, 38.3-4 (2006): 217-57.

⁴⁵ For the poem see Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies*, ed. Lloyd James Austin (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1989) 98; for the Mallarméian tilt from what he still sees as a Parnassian representation to an allusive, evocative presentation see his programmatic remarks in “Sur l’évolution littéraire” (On Literary Evolution) in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 869: “les Parnassiens [...] traitent encore leurs sujets [...] en présentant les objets directement. Je pense qu’il faut, au contraire, qu’il n’y ait qu’allusion. [...] [L]es Parnassiens, eux, prennent la chose entièrement et la montrent: par là ils manquent de mystère; ils retirent aux esprits cette joie délicieuse de croire qu’ils créent. Nommer un objet, c’est supprimer les trois-quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve. [...] Il doit y avoir toujours énigme en poésie, et c’est le but de la littérature – il n’y en a pas d’autres – d’évoquer les objets.” (The Parnassians still treat their subjects by directly presenting their objects. I think, however, that what is needed is allusion only. The Parnassians take the entire thing and show it: this is how they lose the mystery; they rob the mind of the delicious joy of thinking that it creates. To name an object is to suppress three quarters of the poem’s pleasure, which is made for guessing bit by bit; to suggest it,

rarity of the select vocabulary but language itself, turning the somewhat awkward “yx”-sound into a golden treasure of hardly ever seen signifiers.

It would be possible to trace these textual strategies of verbally performing objects throughout the period of literary modernism *via* texts by, say, Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams to those by e.e. cummings or even John Ashbery. Let me just focus on one more example taken from a collection of poems from as late as 1942, which is (for my purpose again) significantly entitled *Le parti pris des choses* (Siding with Things). This is Francis Ponge’s prose poem “L’orange.” I quote its first paragraph:

Comme dans l’éponge il y a dans l’orange une aspiration à reprendre contenance après avoir subi l’épreuve de l’expression. Mais où l’éponge réussit toujours, l’orange jamais: car ses cellules ont éclaté, ses tissus se sont déchirés. Tandis que l’écorce seule se rétablit mollement dans sa forme grâce à son élasticité, un liquide d’ambre s’est répandu, accompagné de raffraîchissement, de parfum suaves, certes, – mais souvent aussi de la conscience amère d’une expulsion prématurée de pépins.⁴⁶

Judging from its title, the poem at first sight (again) looks like a thing poem. But instead of depicting its chosen object, instead of describing it, instead of mimetically referring to, of “imitating,” a specific orange and attributing to it characteristic semantic features, the text rather seems to “symbolize,” to “form” and ‘per-form,’ the ‘orangeness’ of an orange right in front of our eyes. We get less the idea of what an orange is than what an orange does.

Taking its cue rather from the signifier (the *verso*) than the signified (the *recto*), the prose poem departs from the analogous squashing sound resulting from the combination of (different) nasal vowel and (identical) voiced alveo-palatal fricative in both “éponge” and “orange” (note their characteristic nearness to the author’s name). And in this acoustic comparability, it proceeds to evoke the different tactile types of elasticity and recuperability that differentiate the two on

that’s the dream. In poetry, there must always be something enigmatic, the aim of literature being – there is no other aim – to *evoke* objects. [The author’s translation.])

⁴⁶ Francis Ponge, *Le parti pris des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) 41. (As in the sponge, there is in the orange an aspiration to regain countenance after having been subjected to the task of being expressed. But where the sponge always succeeds, the orange never does: its cells have been destroyed, its tissues have been torn. While its skin only slowly re-establishes itself in its form due to its elasticity, an amber liquid has spilt, accompanied, it is true, by sweet refreshment, and perfume – but often also by the bitter awareness of a premature expulsion of pips. [The author’s translation.])

the common ground of their specific form: while the squashing of the (vocally) rounded “éponge” is soft, apt to re-establish its previous form in its entirety (“se rétablit mollement”), the squashing of the (vocally) unrounded “orange” (on account of the different nasal sound) seems to be less ‘elastic’ and more blunt and, hence, does not (entirely) go back to its previous form – but disperses into a multiplicity of perceptive effects, such as an amber-like liquid (“un liquide d’ambre”) or a feeling of pleasant refreshment and odour (“accompagné de rafraîchissement, de parfum suaves”), albeit at the price of the somewhat bitter acknowledgement (“la conscience amère”) of an irrecoverable destruction (“ses cellules ont éclatés, ses tissus se sont déchirés” altogether with “une expulsion prématurée de pépins”).

So what Ponge does in the poem is less describe a real-life orange than ‘make’ a textual one. He presents it rather than representing it. He performs the (I beg your pardon) ‘orangicity’ of the orange, first by giving us an idea of its acoustic form, then by evoking its tactile form and, lastly by adding the ideas of its gustatory and olfactory self-sacrifice at the cost of its squashed visual form. And, in doing so, he not only (celebratingly) produces the surprising multiplicity of the orange’s form – from prematurely expelled seed to the final evocation of the ‘treeness’ of the entire orange tree (as “la raison d’être du fruit,” l. 42) – but also ‘takes sides’ (“Faut-il prendre parti?” l. 11) with the orange as against the (rather boring) sponge in literally and verbally ‘expressing’ it.

Making Things in Narratives

This “rabbit-duck” device of making by performing – of creating rather than imitating, of producing rather than reproducing – begins, as early as in the second half of the nineteenth century, to (slowly but gradually) spill also into narratives. Seemingly mimetic descriptions of seemingly extratextual objects tilt into performative textual creations that exist in the text only, and nowhere else.⁴⁷

It is above all the Flaubertian novel where this tilt of the description from a mere situating *ancilla narrationis* to a textual creation in its own right – to what will

⁴⁷ For a thorough discussion of literary descriptions see Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l’analyse du descriptif* (Introduction to the Analysis of the Descriptive) (Paris: Seuil, 1981); for a shortened English version see also his “Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive,” *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981): 1-26. For an application of the notion of “text puzzles” (as introduced above) to narratives see my “Narrative Vexiertexte: Paradigmatisches Erzählen als Schreiben ohne Ende” (Narrative Text Puzzles: Paradigmatic Narration as Endless Writing), *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 85.3 (2011): 393-410.

later be called a “description créatrice” – can duly be observed.⁴⁸ Right at the beginning of the third part of Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, when Frédéric and Rosanette flee from the chaos and confusion of the 1848 revolution in Paris to the seemingly idyllic romance of the forest of Fontainebleau,⁴⁹ the text resorts to a number of descriptions of the forest’s nature and landscape that at second sight turn out to be more than mere mimetic representations of an alternative, non-urban, non-Parisian surrounding or context. Rather than depict a pleasant and peaceful countryside in contradistinction to a city in turmoil, what these descriptions do is paradigmatically take up elements from other descriptions in the novel and, in doing so, contribute to the overall effect of textually constructing a landscape that, like all the other textual elements in the *Sentimental Education*, produce nothing but contingency (and, as for that, “style”).⁵⁰ What they display is a verbal making of events, revolutions, and catastrophes that entirely remain without meaning. Surely, they do show a landscape, but what they perform is nothing but indifference:

Ils arrivèrent un jour à mi-hauteur d’une colline tout en sable. Sa surface, vierge de pas, était rayée en ondulations symétriques; çà et là, telles que des promontoires sur le lit desséché d’un océan, se levaient des roches ayant de vagues formes d’animaux, tortues avançant la tête, phoques qui rampent, hippopotames et ours. Personne. Aucun bruit. Les sables, frappés par le soleil, éblouissaient; – et tout à coup, dans cette vibration de lumière,

⁴⁸ For the important function played by descriptions in the tilting of narratives from the mimetic to the performative in what he calls “paradigmatic narration” (as opposed to a “syntagmatic” one focused on the plot) see the seminal essay by Rainer Warning, “Erzählen im Paradigma: Kontingenzbewältigung und Kontingenzerposition” (Paradigmatic Narration: Coping with and Exposing Contingency), *Romanistisches Jahrbuch*, 52 (2001): 176-209. For a preparatory path toward this argument see the contributions in *Travail de Flaubert* (Flaubert at Work), ed. Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1983), as well as the cogent reflections on an a-mimetic and anti-semantic, “creative” use of the decriptive in Jean Ricardou, “La description créatrice: Une course contre le sens” (Creative Description: Proceeding against Sense) in *Problèmes du nouveau roman* (Problems of the *nouveau roman*) (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 91-111.

⁴⁹ See Gustave Flaubert, *L’Éducation sentimentale: Histoire d’un jeune homme* (*Sentimental Education*), ed. Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1985) 392ff.

⁵⁰ For a detailed analysis of this see Warning, “Erzählen im Paradigma” 185ff.; for the Flaubertian concept of “style” as “une manière absolue de voir les choses” (an absolute way of seeing things) see his letter to Louise Colet (16 January 1852) in *Correspondance*, ed. Bernard Masson (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) 156.

les bêtes parurent remuer. Ils s'en retournèrent vite, fuyant le vertige, presque effrayés.⁵¹

What Flaubert here does is place his characters in a prehistoric landscape ("des promontoires sur le lit desséché d'un océan"), endow the landscape with descriptive elements ("des roches ayant de vagues formes d'animaux"), make this concoction secretly come alive ("en ondulations symétriques") in order to perform some kind of horror ("les bêtes parurent remuer," "le vertige") and in the end dissolve the whole thing into nothingness ("ils s'en retournèrent [...] presque effrayés").⁵²

Again, one could demonstrate this textual making of verbal things, this performative presentation of literary objects instead of their illusionistic mimetic representation – the activation of the process including the *verso* as against the sole focus on the *recto* as its result – with reference to similar passages in Proust or Conrad or Faulkner or Joyce. Let me, however, conclude by drawing attention to a last passage, which I want to borrow from Samuel Beckett. In his *Texts for Nothing* from the early 1950s, Beckett begins to experiment with descriptions that perform *nothing but* the tilt between *verso* and *recto*, *recto* and *verso*, itself.⁵³ As soon as there threatens to be a "territory," some kind of "content," a semantic result, it finds itself negated and taken back. As soon as there seems to be a configuring 'cut,' the making of a "form," it is immediately annulled and denied.

Let us take a look at the beginning of *Texts for Nothing I*:

Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on.
Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go

⁵¹ Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale* 399. (One day, they arrived half way up a hill entirely made of sand. Its surface, with no traces of footsteps, was marked by symmetrical undulations; here and there, like a promontory in a dried-up ocean bed, rocks stuck out, having the vague form of animals, turtles with their heads moving forward, seals creeping along, hippopotamuses and bears. No-one. No sound. The sand, struck by the sun, dazzled the eyes; – and all of sudden, in the vibration of the light, the animals seemed to move. They quickly went back home, fleeing the dizziness, almost scared. [The author's translation.])

⁵² This seems to correspond precisely again to the aesthetic oscillation (or, as for that, "undulation") between the *recto* and the *verso* of language that is apt to present something absent as present, only to withdraw it in the end; for further elaboration of this see, with regard to poetry, Mahler, "Towards a Pragmasemiotics of Poetry" 234ff.

⁵³ For more details in this see my "From Nothing to Nothing: Emergence(s) and Residue(s) in Beckett's Prose," *Comparatio*, 10.1 (2018): 19-38.

on. I'll describe the place, that's unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, so wild, enough. Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheep-tracks, troughs scooped deep by the rains. It was far down in one of these I was lying; out of the wind. Glorious prospect, but for the mist that blotted out everything, valleys, loughs, plain and sea. How can I go on, I shouldn't have begun, no, I had to begin. Someone said, perhaps the same, What possessed you to come? I could have stayed in my den, snug and dry, I couldn't. My den, I'll describe it, no, I can't. It's simple, I can do nothing any more, that's what you think.⁵⁴

This is the typical Beckettian game of positing and negating, of evocation and annulment, of triggering the "imaginary" (by drawing the "real" into a possible "gestalt") and immediately disavowing it. It makes emerge a potential "form" and, in offering the 'per-forming' act, obliterates it by withdrawing it on the brink of having evoked it.

The Beckettian title that perhaps best illustrates this device is the one of his short prose piece "Imagination Dead Imagine."⁵⁵ Its imperative ("imagine") invites us to cast something as a "form" that at the same time is acknowledged as no longer having one ("imagination dead"). The paradoxicality of the imperative makes us see the performing act itself: it shows (and makes us aware of) the oscillatory movement on the "margin," the "tilting game" between *verso* and *recto* and *recto* and *verso*. It gives us a glimpse of the radical ground of the signifying process. It gives us a "differential epiphany": the revelation of an impossible presence/co-presence or, as the English language so aptly has it, the impossible but wonderful gratification of "having the cake and eating it, too."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: Faber and Faber, 2010) 3.

⁵⁵ For a highly suggestive reading of "Imagination Dead Imagine" in the context of his triad of the "real," the "fictive" and the "imaginary" see Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 238-46; the following reading is, of course, only one of the multiplicity of possible readings of this syntagm.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed use of this (for my purposes) highly apposite idiom see my "Disciplining Relevance" 28; as well as in greater systematicity my "Über nichts: Praktiken des Ästhetischen" (On Nothing: Practices of the Aesthetic), *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 65.2 (2015): 203-25.