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The Character of "Character"

Hélène Cixous

I. Introduction

What exactly is "character"? How is it possible at present to think of the "concept" of "character"—if it is a concept? Assuming that this concept has a history, how far are we along now in this history or in the examination of this history? What does "character" name? These questions are, on the one hand, involved in a whole system of critical presuppositions and crop up from traditional discussions about literature, within a conception of literary creation that is today outmoded. But, on the other hand, these same questions, having cropped up out of a disintegrating system, allow, through displacement, for the emergence of new, prying questions opening out onto the unknown of a text rather than its recognizable development; onto life, the incessant agitation of literary practice rather than its theses and its stability; onto its indescribable, unidentifiable aspects rather than its rules and means of being classified. To be more precise, it is with the removal of the question of "character" that the question of the nature of fiction comes to the fore, as well as the examination of subjectivity—through fiction, in fiction, and as fiction: where the term "fiction" should not be taken simply (in the sense of borne in mind) as part of a pair of opposites, which would make it the contrary of "reality." Here, rather, it would appear that subjectivity as reality is continuously worked over by fiction, because of several factors: the surplus reality produced by the indomitable desire in the text; that which, beginning with the subject, tears itself away, through desire, from what already exists (le déjà-là), from the donnée, to project itself out into what does not yet exist (le non-encore-là), into the unheard-of; and the imaginary, secreted by a subjectivity that has always been disturbed, changeable, literally populated with a mass of "Egos."

1 As I began to suggest in my essay on "La Fiction et ses fantômes" (Poétique, 10) and elaborate in Les Prémos de personne (Seuil, Coll. Poétique, 1974). The present remarks go along with the basic ideas of the latter work.
I take the *imaginary* here in the Lacanian sense, coupled with the *symbolic* (i.e., with the concatenation of the signifier, or the order of discourse). The imaginary is the material of the symbolic, which it enters into and supports. It is subordinate to the symbolic. The imaginary is the category of identifications. Any relation between one thing and another is part of the imaginary. (In this sense, the notion of “character” necessarily goes back to a theory of the imaginary.) The “Ego” is the location of the Subject’s identifications, primary and secondary. As an “imaginary nature,” the “Ego” is a function of unawareness that makes knowledge and ideology possible. It is on the basis of the imaginary and by means of its restriction that “characterization” is produced; and “characterization” conducts the game of ideology.

In fact, the “socialization” of the subject, its insertion in the social machine, can be accomplished only at the price of controlling the production of the imaginary, by repressing the production of the unconscious that poses a threat to established order, with the Ego relegated to its “civil” place in the social system. A “character” is always in store for the subject along the chain where everything is coded in advance. “Character” and I.D. card go together in this restricting process of which literary interpretation (by means of the encoding—the laying of the wires for a current—that it effects) becomes the reinforcement and reflection. Now, if “I”—true subject, subject of the unconscious—is what I can be, “I” am always on the run.

It is precisely this open, unpredictable, piercing part of the subject, this *potentiel* to rise up, that the “concept” of “character” excludes in advance. Under the reign of this “concept,” the mass of Egos would be reduced to the absolute monarch that “character” wants to be. . . . that is, if the unconscious could be canceled out. Actually, if “character” is the product of a repression of subjectivity, and if the handling of literary scenes is done under the aegis of masterdom, of the conscious, which conventionalizes, evaluates, and codes so as to conform to set types, according to cultural demand, then the *imperishable* text can be recognized by its ability to evade the prevailing attempts at reappropriating meaning—and at establishing mastery, with which the myth (for it is a myth) of “character” collaborates in so far as it is a sign, a cog in the literary machinery.

If “character” has a sense, then it is as a Figure that can be used in semiotics: the “personage” functions as a social sign, in relation to other signs, within a text which, if it admits of the existence of “character,” necessarily goes back to pure representationalism. Such a text is governed by a coding process that assures its communicability;
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through "character" is established the identification circuit with the reader: the more "character" fulfills the norms, the better the reader recognizes it and recognizes himself. The commerce established between book and reader is thus facilitated. A community consigns its comforts and its goods to this mirror relation. Literature thereby assumes value as a marketable form. The marketable form of literature, we might say, is closely related to that familiar, decipherable human sign that "character" claims to be: in the "concept" of "character" the allurements are all asserted, forming mutual leagues and legacies in order to make up a certain literary scene: this "concept" organizes "recognition"; it is offered to the perception of the reader who can take account of it; it is given as explicable; it patronizes meaning. Porte-parole of sense, it is bound up with the authority of the author and expresses his messages. It leads one, finally, to assume a "depth," a truth that is hidden but discoverable. In fact, "character" is the servant of a certain order that parades itself across the theater of writing.

By definition, a "character," preconceived or created by an author, is to be figured out, understood, read: he is presented, offered up to interpretation, with the prospect of a traditional reading that seeks its satisfaction at the level of a potential identification with such and such a "personage," the reader entering into commerce with the book on condition that he be assured of getting paid back, that is, recompensed by another who is sufficiently similar to or different from him—such that the reader is upheld, by comparison or in combination with a personage, in the representation that he wishes to have of himself.

In this system, the "character" represents a set of externals. He has referents (real causes that are anterior and exterior to the text: he could be the portrait of a real person) to which he alludes, while he fixes his essential traits so as to preserve them in the book. He is therefore the guarantor of the transmission of sense and of the "true," at once porte-parole, emissary, and idol, indubitably human, at least partially universalizable, and homogeneous.

The ideology underlying this fetishization of "character" is that of an "I" who is a whole subject (that of the "character" as well as that of the author), conscious, knowable; and the enunciatory "I" expresses himself in the text, just as the world is represented complementarily in the text in a form equivalent to pictorial representation, as a simulacrum.

This is all accomplished in the name of some reality principle

2 "Vouloir-dire" as a substantive has attained a pejorative connotation, especially in contemporary French criticism, insofar as it implies a certain logocentrism of the author.
("Life," "truth," "biography," "sense") to which the text is subordinated. It is a subjugation enunciated from the outset by the semantic history of the word character: coming from the Greek kharattoin, to engrave, it is first the mark, the drawn, written, preserved sign; then the title, natural or legal, which confers a rank, a right... A mark, then, by which the "character" is assured to be that which has been characterized and refers back to the stamp, to the origin. It includes in its lexical evolution—that part connected with expression ("he's a person of 'character'")), with description—the art of the portrait; with the distinguishing mark, it is that which morally differentiates one person from another. Figuratively, it is designed more and more to function as an active element in the process of social coding—to the point of becoming an "account," a certificate of conformity, the very mark of the intervention of the censor ("detailed report of a person's quality, good repute"). Finally, it goes off to appear on the dramatic stage, which is none other than the representation of a "real" that is itself a stage: the personage is thus, in the final analysis, the role of roles.

Punctuation mark, graphic character, print type, the trait that dominates the nature of character is precisely that of being the "specific nature" of a thing; it is the instrument and the essence of what pertains, what belongs. "That's him all right! That's me all right!" people say, as they perform a specular operation that consists of the Ego's (re)appropriation of itself.

And what can be said of its French equivalent, "le personnage"? A sketch of its lexical history proves still more illuminating: "person" is first a mask used by the Etruscan actor. From here we pass metonymically to the role played—in the theater or in life. The earliest usage adopted by the French language is that of "ecclesiastic person" (cf. the English person). The personnage is not simply a person: he is a notable; a fictitious person, man or woman, he personifies. He serves the function of... being. It is this representational function by which the true subject can be but dragged down or banned by the civil powers that be. As soon as we say "character," or personnage, we are in the theater, but a theater that offers no exit, that takes in everything, that substitutes itself for a nonrepresentational reality.

"Character" occupies a privileged position in the novel or the play: without "character," passive or active, no text. He is the major agent of the work, at the center of a stage that is commanded by his presence, his story, his interest. Upon his "life" depends the life of the text—so they say. This is why he should not be too mortal. It is therefore disturbing to many that, at the present time, he has disappeared. Haven't they announced once again "the death of the hero" (another
death of God, in short)—a death generally experienced by the reader as a murder, a loss, on which follows the reader's quick withdrawal of his investment, since he sees nothing more to be done with a text that has no one in it? No one to talk to, to recognize, to identify with. The reader is loath to venture into a place where there is no mirror, to go forth, so to speak, onto ground that is still virgin and perhaps even nonhuman, even if this ground is in fact the system of roots that constitutes language rather than the visible, delimited, framed, comforting stage. Is the "hero" or "character," the captor of the imaginary, dead? No, he is just brought out of his blinding ignorance; he is unmasked: which does not mean revealed! But rather denounced, returned to his reality as simulacrum, brought back to the mask as mask. He is given up then to the complexity of his subjectivity, to his multiplicity, to his off-center position, to his permanent escapade: like the author, he disappears only to be multiplied, attains the self only to be, in the same instant, differentiated into a trans-subjective effervescence.

So long as the questions of subject, of its subjectification, remain unasked, we will be trapped.

So long as we do not put aside "character" and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with classical reasoning and the appropriating economy that such reasoning supports, we will remain locked up in the treadmill of reproduction. We will find ourselves, automatically, in the syndrome of role-playing. So long as we take to be the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask, so long as we ignore the fact that the "subject" is an effect of the unconscious and that it never stops producing the unconscious—which is unanalyzable, uncharacterizable, we will remain prisoners of the monotonous machination that turns every "character" into a marionette.

"I" must become a "fabulous opera" and not the arena of the known. Understand it the way it is: always more than one, diverse, capable of being all those it will at one time be, a group acting together, a collection of singular beings that produce the enunciation. Being several and insubordinable, the subject can resist subjugation. In texts

3. Nonhuman: because a non-repressed subject can produce forms of unexpected, unheard of subjectivity, which then throws off the identification process; what if I were to become an animal (Kafka), several others (Ulysses), a scrap (Beckett), a set of animal, mythic, fantasized productions (Neutre by Hélène Cixous)?
that evade the standard codes, the “personage” is, in fact, Nobody*—he is that which escapes and leads somewhere else. How could he carry me away otherwise? If he repeated me, how could he surprise me, ravish me? Fortunately, even when Nobody is dubbed with names of “characters,” when Nobody is alive, there is still a part of his subjectivity that remains unassigned, on which the code has no hold, which disorganizes the discourse, and which produces itself (it is not produced or reproduced or reproductive, but inventive and formative). In saying this, I am not referring by priority or exclusivity to any particular modernist literature that has had the benefit of psychoanalytic insights.

The problem of the subject and its relation to fiction, and in general the whole problematic complex of subjects of a text (“person,” group-subject, reader, scriptor, writing), all the instances of production—all this is new only in its systematic and continually developing formulation since the advent of psychoanalysis by a certain antipsychoanalysis and a certain philosophy of fiction. 4 But here the immediate question is that of subjectivity insofar as it continually gives rise to modifications and re-examinations of any structure that agitates a certain number of “pre-Freudian” texts, never submitted to traditional criticism, uncodifiable by means of “character.” These texts baffle every attempt at summarization of meaning and limiting, repressive interpretation. The subject flounders here in the exploded multiplicity of its states, shattering the homogeneity of the ego of unawareness, spreading out in every possible direction, into every possible contradiction, transegoistically. From this off-center, eccentric subjectivity flow all the questions—beginning with “What will I have to do with it?” and “Who is speaking?”—that interest us: “Who am I when I am you, you, or him, and pretty far away from myself?” and also “If I can be all my others, who couldn’t I be?” And if, like Nietzsche, I can say: “I am all the names in history,” then how can I not question the value of the proper Name, the value of History, and that of the subject’s history in its peripatetic through its personal individualities? By means of which critical discourse will I be able to grasp that which “character” can neither cover nor contain nor designate? and yet, who bears a first name and who becomes?

How would it be possible to study “character” in Virginia Woolf’s

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* I have translated personne throughout as “nobody,” though this should be understood in its ambiguity of “a person”/“no person” (translator’s note).

4 I am thinking in particular here of the beautiful “antialysis” by Gilles Deleuze reading Lewis Carroll, or Klossowski, or Artaud, in terms of the movement of their intensities (see Logique du Sens, and Deleuze and Guattari, L’Anti-Oedipe).
The Waves when the vacillation of subjectivity between "nobody" and all the possible individualities decomposes the text by provoking it? What is a "character" in a Joycean text? Or in a text by Henry James? or by Shakespeare? How is one to describe, circumscribe this subject-plus-one that explodes structures and ruins social and affective economy? No designation can connect Nobody. This subject is any other—and also all those that precede it and those it anticipates. It is no accident that Nobody was at a crucial moment the name of Ulysses and that from Ulysses flows Joyce's Ulysses with his thousands of individualities. And the point here is not to use, by contagion, new critical concepts that happen to be "alamode."

Literature has been at work for a long time on this subversion that has now become its pride. In pre-Marxist and pre-Freudian times, before the joint efforts of psychoanalysis and linguistics, of antirealism, began to radicalize the dismantling process that is now taking place actively and massively, what was happening in literature? The same struggle went on, in different forms, through different channels: it took place perhaps more violently because it was more hopeless, with text laid bare, less subversive, and more offensive.

There were the same bastions to destroy for the German Romantics, for example, as for us: logocentrism, idealism, theologism, all the props of society, the scaffolding of political and subjective economy, the pillars of property. The machine of repression has always had the same accomplices; homogenizing, reductive, unifying reason has always allied itself to the Master, to the single, stable, socializable subject, represented by its types or characters: and it is there, at the base, that literature has already struck—where the theses and concepts of Order were imposed—by denouncing them at the level of the signified.

Long ago Georges Bataille and James Joyce, Hoffmann and Kleist virulently took to task the idealism of Hegel and the confining "dialectical" of Recognition. Poets of Subversion, devoirs of conservative narcissism, breakers of yokes and of shackles, they tear away the subject from subjugation, rip up personal possession,* dismember the marionette, cut the strings, distort the mirrors. Early on Hoffmann set free the complicated intoxication of knowing that "I" is more than one. As an artist of subjectivity, he set out, as I wish to show by way of example, not to make the subject disappear, but to bring it back to

* I translate propre as "personal possession" in this context, though the word has a great many other connotations in French, such as "one's own (self)," "characteristic feature," and an etymological trajectory that goes from the "close," or "intimate" to "that which is appropriated, or taken away" by way of the notion of property (propriété) and family (not given) name (nom propre) (translator's note).
its divisibility. To attack the home (le chez-soi) and conscious existence (le pour-soi), to show the fragility of the center and the partitions of the ego, is to hinder the complicity of the Ego as a masterful and masterable "character" by exercising authority, by reducing the human being to role-playing, and by advocating property in all its forms.

When Hoffmann dismantles the Great Proprietor (le Grand Propre), the one called Someone, he is calling on the infinite Nobody to speak.

II. Portrait of the Artist as Artists

There exists a series of admirable texts, a sort of fantastical musical notebook, that gathers together (under the title here of Kreisleriana, but it might as well be entitled Hoffmannia, or whatever you wish) diverse thoughts, dispersed portraits, disconnected people, thought-persons, that are similar in that they all proceed from a marvelous life-source, which is indicated at times by the name of Kreisler, at times by the name of Hoffmann or of Wallborn—and of many others, and whose infinite variations are carried along by a flux of reflections on (musical and human) composition. This life-source is itself a source of writing and of musical notation, and the musical source is the source of life. A fabulous continuity enlivens this opera of fluids, in such a way that space, time, body, relations among all things and all beings, are reintegrated; substances, individuals, sensations, localizations are liberated, and in this vast movement of unfettered centers and peripheries there is a continuous materialization and dissolution of passionate encounters, recognitions, personifications—concerts of singularities that give rise to the modulated melody of a name, of crystallized moments, of events, which concert to make a "story" woven together of snapshots; and these bottomless, limitless spaces, these beginningless times, these leaps and bounds, are permeated by a few beings of unclear gender, human or musical or amorous, who recognize one another and deliver resounding messages in an ecstatic exchange of correspondences, identities, othernesses, and enchanting supersubjectivities. No preperson is ever held back in his precipitation into the other who speaks to him in his name or who makes him reverberate with the convulsive airs of his libido. The material is personal, multiple, exultant, not masculine or feminine or neuter, but amorous, of lively, musical sex, and uncharacterizable.

To attribute this material to anyone would be impossible, as it is taken down only when it occurs to one of the loyal friends, who are similar or identical to one another. Yet it is not absolutely unlimited;
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it doesn't get lost for lack of designation. On the contrary, it takes on—so as to be well liked—a few authors' names, a few instants of signature, and a few restrictions on breaking loose; thus—we are told by one of the singularities filling the role of author—all that is gathered together in this notebook of follies is some "very disconnected" reflections. But the editor of the author-persona—who is himself an invention of the author—has been entreated by various Kreisler personae to burn ruthlessly the "very very disconnected" reflections, which he is supposed to do out of love for each and every one of the individual potentialities of choirmaster Kreisler. The very very disconnected potentialities of the master, as to person, writing, or resonance, have not disappeared without leaving enough of a trace for us to feel at every moment their possible presence in the text or in some recollection emanating from a multivocal memory.

A self-same sensibility, unstandardized, designates by name these perfect friends separable by nothing but chance and distance. But it is the same sensibility that, passing through the dear form of Baron Wallborn, cuts like lightning across the bizarre little body of another Lordship who might, on a night of gluttony, be named Dr. Schulz of Rathenow, yes, exactly the same, who, rebounding from this witty Lordship, will galvanize another fraternal, witty Lordship, nourished just as much on song, harmony, violins, flutes, and capable of divine exaltation, which, in the person of Johannes Kreisler, intercepts the waves and harmonics of all these Excellencies evoked in such a crazily musical way. For Johannes Kreisler, who once carried music shut up within him, burst open; the music sprang forth violently, and now he's the one who's shut up inside music. His Excellency is the Baron Wallborn whom Kreisler carried in his heart, who no doubt sprang out of it at the same time as music, and who now encompasses it. This baron, however, issued from the heart and returns there, just as Johannes' breath blown through an instrument comes back to his ears as chords. And because he is an excellent musician, Kreisler cannot help but recognize the key in which his Excellency is played. The way Wallborn, by a turn of the treble clef, became momentarily Dr. Schulz, the way Kreisler, in the guise of Schulz in ecstasy, was forgiven his madness, and the way Schulz could then become him, the way he was so racked with pain that the heavenly image that inflames his innermost fibers is set loose from his innermost self, and the way he becomes, as the result of melodies, the good, the gentle, the amiable Wallborn, in such a manner that his melody is the speech of his interlocutor and the melody flares up in him the moment that the one he wishes to be breaks into speech; all these transformations of the mad-musician par
excellence make of the Kreisleriana a tumultuous, nearly unreadable notebook in several-part harmony whose author varies according to the key in which he is played. Kreisler, whose key predominates, himself no more than a melody desirous of dissolving into heavenly spaces, has an admirer who is an excellent being in every way but who is sometimes defined as "the enemy of music"; and actually, were he not, as described, incapable of taking pleasure in the art, he would be indistinguishable from the famous choirmaster. Thus, through a series of encounters in which he is by himself his own groupuscule or club, complementing himself, listening to himself, opening himself to multiple possibilities, in a storm of affects, shaken by intensities in E-major or F-major, Kreisler, disconcerting, hears himself, depersonalizes himself in the other who singularizes him, and precedes himself to the point of losing his hearing.

But this dance of singulars by Kreisler and others, these prancing intensities, are no insignificant flourishes; in the guise of caprice—from a disorganized chapter-sequence and plain pretentiousness to incoherence or insanity—arduous, painstaking research is going on which the stylistic extravagances at once veil and reflect. The object of this research is the mystery of musical genius, of the origin of music. And this research violently divides the researcher: he is himself a mysterious source, a composer, a "master" (but master of what discipline?)—and also the disciple devoured by curiosity, the student in search of knowledge. Someone in him "knows" what someone else does not. The furious "we" frequently written in the name of Kreisler is precisely this artist interrogating his art and taking his soul apart to pluck out the secrets of its creation, as if he were more than one and as if he weren't the master of his own mastery. Hence his apostrophic, conversational, passionate, elliptical style: the emitter and receiver of the discourse is he himself divided by the pangs of a thought process that must follow the incompatible rules of two systems of logic: conscious logic, that which harasses the living in order to subjugate it, and unconscious logic, of which the conscious would like to be master and analyst. But in the receiver there is always a thief of the message, the knowledge, the object that he is supposed to send back to the sender. And it is hopeless from the outset for the subject to speak to the Other within him in the hope that, by "knocking at the door of the great smithy," something will open up.

The comedy of the notebook-man simply records the humiliation of the Ego discovering that he is not the master of his house, but who, at the same time, rushes to meet the guests he doesn't know and—if possible—in order to become familiar with them or to win them over,
even speaks their language; then his surprise to discover that many more things are happening continually in his house than he can reveal to his conscious. At least the subject doesn’t slam the door of his house: he is just at times rather unhappy, for, in this pre-Freudian era, he cannot give up without difficulty his reign over the circle of loyal friends. In a sense, all these fine masters and companions, barons, enthusiastic young people, former apes, are Kreisler at one time or another during his stormy existence. Why should they hold it against him if, once in a while, he wants to mix his “scrawl” in with their “clean, clear hieroglyphics”? For he expects his instruction to come in the form of calligraphy. Indeed, as we shall see, the members of the “poetico-musical club” that meets in Kreisler’s “house” have a common project that allows them on occasion to sign for one another. It is a philosophical reflection on musical notation.

The point is not to reduce everything to a sort of synthetic Kreisler, a melting-pot of homogeneous phantoms. Kreisler’s “you-as-me” figures, in fact, substitute themselves for one another on the basis of differences asserted all the more readily as, finally, they ensure the Kreisleriana of its movement and rhythm—that is, its style of life, and at the same time a whole series of individual leaks that guarantee this set, so often shaken by explosions, against complete annihilation. There always remains someone on the surface when all the others have vanished, a correspondent to whom the last letter is addressed and who takes charge of forwarding it, a “loyal friend” who takes on the duty of editing the ever so disconnected reflections. A new edition of the collection is always in progress. For the Kreisler “set” is composed of two simultaneous series, admirably conceived so that all the excesses of the person he wants to be, including all the others, are possible without drawing out the work to a point of no return, where any identification process would become impossible. The fear of absolute externality, of the unrecognizable, is the flip side of a reckless narcissism. What are these two series and how do they relate to each other?

The Kreisleriana is from the outset divided into two series. The first series constitutes a sort of rambling journal kept by choirmaster Kreisler which sets out in bits and pieces a long discourse at once critical and theoretical on music and the following related subjects: that music, which is a divine art, should be reserved for the initiated and not prostitute itself in society; that the secret of music is beyond mankind; and yet doesn’t music reside in the very heart of man?

Doesn’t it reside in the very heart of man? doesn’t it fill his soul with lovely images, so that the spirit yields itself entirely to music, and so that
here on earth a new, transfigured life is ready to tear the spirit away from the constraint, from the overpowering torments of earthly existence? Yes, a divine force comes over man and, giving way with childlike piety to that which the spirit arouses within him, he begins to speak the language of this mysterious kingdom. Like the apprentice reading aloud from his master’s magic book, he evokes unwittingly, from his very depths, a thousand marvelous apparitions that scud across life, flying in radiant circles, and fill whomever sees them with infinite nostalgia;

that what springs from the depths of a being must be understood in the depths of that being and performed with supernatural intuitiveness; that music is a voice of the heights or of the depths, but never of the base and vulgar: music is the most romantic of all arts—it is not useful, it makes no “sense,” it is gratuitous, its object is the infinite; it is the mysterious Sanscrit of nature, which is expressed through sounds, which fills man’s heart with infinite yearning; they add that man can understand only through music the sublime singing of trees, flowers, animals, stones, and streams! The useless trifles of counterpoint, which are of no cheer whatsoever to the listener and, as a result, depart from the actual aims of music, are called mysterious and disturbing combinations and might be compared to moses, grasses, or flowers all marvelously intertwined.

The interweaving of musical structures does not stifle the sound:

Everything is interwoven, arranged among the parts of various instruments, and put together with the most beautiful sense of unity. Such is its general structure; but within this artfully constructed edifice, there is a succession, in constant flight, of marvelous images, the appearance and interpenetration of joy and suffering, sadness and happiness. Strange apparitions take up a joyous dance, at first blending into one spot of light, then scattering into sparks, then into flashes, pursuing one another, chasing one another in groups of all forms.

Pure music (that which is purely musical) cannot be subordinated to a poetic discourse or to dramatic ends. It ravishes. It cannot be repossessed; it belongs to no one, be he artist (performer) or listener. Its mathematical proportions, the mysterious rules of counterpoint, are but a grammar of an enchanted language. “The infinite variety of musical phrases, from the outset, forbids hazarding here any rule whatsoever; by relying, however, on a vivid imagination corrected by experience, some indications can be given, and I would call them, as a whole, a mystique of instruments.”

From one page to another the famous “master” celebrates this language (spoken by few: he cites Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Bach) and
its unique power, which is a fire, a source, an energy, the irresistible record of a mysterious libido: the only truly sovereign production. And he opposes it, in every possible manner, ironically yet fervently, to subjugated arts, to the very ones that attempt to subordinate it (as in the operatic text) and defends it against all process of reduction: it is not an entertainment, it is not an amusement, it is not a background, it is never minor, secondary, familial, or domestic.

The first series is a musical composition, a sort of hymn by Kreisler, moving, hostile with respect to the uninitiated, and painful. The pain becomes comprehensible when, by the end of an entirely different second series, we have been through this heaven turned upside down, this inferno of delights that makes up the Kreisler set—a set that includes—or is included by—Kreisler’s editor (whom we could call Hoffmann). The second series is this strange set of I-as-you figures, composed of a certain nonfinite number of men defined positively or negatively by their relation to music, victims or idolizers of the art, but all of them, in any case, subject to its power. This series of Excellencies is put together as a signifying chain in relation to the series of reflections which then takes on the dimension of the Signified: the same problematic relation connects the two spaces, but if we follow the meanderings and jumps of the signifying series, we find ourselves buried in repetitions, abysses of tormented passion, dissonances, very striking changes in tone. Zones of depression succeed zones of exaltation, depending on whether one is near or far from the realm of the infinite, on whether one remains at the edge peering down at its depths or is overcome with dizziness. It becomes clear that one question haunts these texts throughout. The first series describes in general the effect of music. This supernatural effect is undefinable except in terms of a mystico-pictorial analogy: the cause of this effect, the secret of its power, that which is the desirable, is the inaccessible. “True” music appears as the signified in perpetual flight, constantly evoked, represented, written down, noted, but no sooner noted than snatched away, always some other. (In a certain way, it is the other arts, particularly pictorial art, that serve the function of signifiers constantly referring back, constantly deceptive.) In the second series, the problem is attacked head on, in its most dramatic form: music is just as much a mystery to the composer as to the listener. It is given, but it is a disturbing gift, which takes everything, which possesses and draws along, beyond every limit, the subject who has nonetheless produced it. The master can multiply himself as much as he likes in an attempt to make off with the secret: not only will he never be able to, but what is more, in his efforts toward an inconceivable truth, he actually adds to the
density of the mystery: the more he is numerous and the more he spreads out to encompass the object of his desire, the more the mystery goes beyond him and plays at his expense: the Kreisler set is the instrument of this music. Music, like life, ravishes the subject that produces it. While in the first series the choirmaster appears to be the master-sage, he is shifted to master-fool in the second. What happens, then, from one series to the other? In the first series, Kreisler sets forth the contemptuous discrepancies that exist between the dignity of the art and its dishonorable exploitation by commoners. In the other part, there arises another discrepancy—the "true" one, the one that at first was repressed in vain. This true discrepancy is the one that breaks the relation (that makes a broken relation) between music at its source, mental music, the work as it is heard—or even seen—in the soul of the artist, and its actualization in the form of a written copy, a notation that, by "repeating" it, consigns it to repetition: here is where the idea is confirmed—so cruelly—that the scoring (partition) of music is thereafter a real partition.5 This music, this air that seems to bring about universal communication among human beings, between human beings and all forms of nature, and among the natural realms themselves—this mistress of correspondences, in reality, communicates nothing of its most profound truth; it is not communicable. What we hear, these audible readings of scored parts, are nothing but the remains of a division that has cut music into two unequal halves, into two "languages"; the "individualized language" and the "universal language," one that accompanies and the other that accompanies nothing, but that creates, that is not unlike the "sacred," the Supreme Being Himself.

In a very beautiful chapter on "Effect in Music," someone who rises above Kreisler's suffering and remains anonymous, outside the you-as-I relationship, points out the difference in practice between the true effect and the artificial effect in music. The one springs irresistibly and spontaneously out of the depths of the spirit and passes from the genius' soul to the listener's soul by way of the soul. The other is "fabricated," from the outside, out of technical exercises and formal imitations, taking its cue from the impresarios or from simple-minded composers: this effect remains external, never entering the soul, and falls flat. The imitation of form never creates spirit: "It is spirit alone that, governing at will the methods employed, reigns in these masterpieces as absolute sovereign." But at the same time, it is this necessity that blends with the essence of musicality, which in reality results so often (perhaps always) in tearing apart, in cleavage, in a sense of loss: for that

5 For Lacan, it is from his partition that the subject proceeds to his parturition.
which is at once infinite and complete, faultless, in the soul of the
creator, is this way only insofar as the marvelous sounds of his interior
music go on: but this realm cannot be part of this world; it has no
direct tie with the natural scene, as does painting, for example; musi-
cal sound belongs to a "superior language": it is speech heard only
deep inside man. The musician is someone who grasps everything
(colors, smells, light) musically.

For the musician, sight is an internal hearing, that is, an intimate feeling
for music which, vibrating in unison with his spirit, produces sounds in
everything his eyes perceive. Thus, these sudden inspirations of the
musician, the springing forth in him of melodies, could be considered
the perception—the unconscious, or rather linguistically inexpressible
conception—of the secret music of nature, taken to be the principle of
life or of every vital activity.

The musician hears everything; he is all ears. As composer, he will fix
and enclose within written signs these nameless affects. Having a
privileged relation to the unconscious, a singing unconscious, he can
learn the art of "representing" emotions by notes. But what a diminish-
ing enterprise! Musical notation is nothing more than an "ingenious
alignment of hieroglyphs," the engraving of "characters," which "pre-
erves only the indication of what we have perceived." The divergence
between signifier and signified is huge and unparalleled. Verbal lan-
guage, on the other hand, does not face this fracture: "There exists
such a close alliance between the sound and the word that no thought
springs up in us without its hieroglyphics." Music, however, speaks to
us, it tells us everything, enflames us, envelops us; we can understand
it, but we cannot speak it: because it is life itself, no notation can ac-
count for it. What is locked up in the score is nothing more than a
transformation of music into common language, the attenuating record,
practically the "execution," demanded by our simply human need for
mastery, the refusal to be alone to hear. "And what if the spirit of
music, roused by the initiate, were expressed in mysterious chords
intelligible to him alone?" inquires Johannes Kreisler. The unbearable
option is there: either transcribe into intelligible statements the chords
perceived by the interior ear, give them up to interpretation, and lose
what lies beyond: lose life so as to preserve its trace in the form of
notes, or of characters; or, in solitude, listen to the song of life; but in
a solitude such that it is scarcely different from nonexistence. Never
to hear anything but a simulacrum; or to be but a phantom. Johannes
Kreisler, since he cannot give one answer, nor choose one of the paths,
moves continuously from one side to the other, trying to fit them
together. On the side of communication, he identifies with the geniuses (Mozart, Beethoven, Glück) in such a way that he removes the risk of their solitude: he is the ideal listener. He goes so far as to encounter them at the obscure site of enunciation: it is in this way that he can tell us about the inception of the overture to Don Juan, whose secret is held by him alone—and Mozart, his other self. On the side of silence, he divides himself into several representatives of the Ego, with whom he is in correspondence as the hypnotist with his medium, the musician with nature-music, colors with sounds: he works in concert with them, "his strong determination being the one question that nature (or the other) never leaves unanswered." He invents accomplices who can understand him at the very level of enunciation:

We are made such that as soon as one of us speaks, the other cannot hold his tongue. . . . You know very well what I mean. . . . but look here, my dear student: when I used the word "we" in the preceding phrases, I felt as though I was resorting to the plural simply as an elegant form of modesty, and, when using the singular, as though I was speaking of myself alone; it seems to me that, in the last analysis, you and I are but one.

His who is designated as Kreisler, situated at this point in the sequence of variations on the Ego, amidst rapid transformations, is so volatile that wherever he appears he is at once in a second place and in a second state; what is more, his body jumps around and visibly changes shape; he is, finally, more and more inaccessible himself—nearly post-Kreislerian. It is certainly his ardor, his suffering, his desire that make these pages resonate where he moves about—where he has just passed by. Sometimes on the side of the inaudible, other times on the side of enunciation, he is comparable to the musical "mirror"; in a certain way, he approaches the art he idolizes by fading away: his desire—and what he achieves—is to be no longer the expression of music, but a puff of air: while I-as-you, in the filiation of his signifying confères, persists in listening to, conveying, pursuing, counseling, hiding the absence, I-as-I runs out of breath and vanishes into unspeakably thin air. . . .

III. A Representation of Representation:
How to Outcharacterize Character

There exists a letter to the Stagehands that Hoffmann wrote at the time he was Johannes Kreisler and directing the orchestra of the . . . Opera. It is a letter of the utmost importance in that it could be composed only after a period of intellectual fasting prompted by a long
series of errors. It is our author's *The Gay Science*, the sign of his recovery.

First of all, I am indebted to my stay in ... for being cured of the many dangerous errors I had previously fallen prey to; there it was, too, that I gave up my puerile admiration of people I had once regarded as great men, geniuses. Besides an imposed yet very salutary intellectual fasting, the cause of my recovery was the regular use they recommended of that clear, extraordinarily pure water, which, in ... , and especially at the theatre ... gushes? ... no! but which flows gently and silently from numerous sources.

For example, I can still remember with a genuine sense of shame the respect—what am I saying?—the puerile veneration—I used to feel for the stage-designer and -setter at the theatre of X.

One of the symptoms of Kreisler's sickness was a puerile veneration for the stagehands of the theater of X ... and an absurd adherence to their principles, according to which the sets and stage machinery were to blend into the text: thus, the staging that existed then was in the service of "the theatrical superstition of the text and the dictatorship of the writer" (Artaud). One should be careful not to materialize or to actualize the theater, thus conferring upon it the value of a spectacle; otherwise the spectator would be transported far away from the theater and, without realizing it, end up in the imaginary land of poetry.

These are the precepts of this doctrine of subservience that Kreisler never stopped attacking from then on:

—Resort in every case to sets, machinery, staging to perfection, so as to ensure the most complete illusion.
—Comply down to the meanest detail with the poet's intention.
—Preserve the effect of unity under the author's direction.
—Eliminate every detail that might suggest a connection—by comparison, by direct reference, or by reflection—with reality.
—Get rid of all trace of labor: paints, canvases, planks, etc.; therefore, distrust all slipshod artisans who, "instead of conceiving their work in line with lofty poetry, have dragged the theater down to the rank of a wretched magic lantern."

Of the three domains covered by the stagehand's job, the imaginary, the real, and the theatrical, the first is out of bounds; the second is so far subordinated to him as to be his repressed matter; as for the last, he is flatly excluded from it. The motto of the "perfect" stagehand: "No theatre at the opera."

In his letter to the Stagehands, our friend Kreisler exposes the dia-
bolical scheme of the poets for whom the stagehands act, unconsciously or not, as accomplices: it is nothing short of an abuse of confidence, a hypnotization of the spectator who responds on demand, like an automaton. The poet behaves with regard to his audience like the leader (as described by Freud) with regard to a primary horde: he deprives it of the real world and plunges it into a place of violence, where he moves it, tortures it, impasses it—in short, makes it dance to the tune of his pipe. This great paranoid encounters virtually no resistance since he is assisted by the servant-stagehands. No more theater, no more real. What is left is the imaginary and its magical, wicked, ephemeral aspects, the paltry offerings of the fantastic, insofar as it is alienating: for the "spectacle" doesn't give the poor, swindled spectator his own phantasms to enjoy. They are the phantasms of the great poet, with whom the clever conspiracy has forced the spectator to identify.

Thus exclaims our furious choirmaster, taking apart the machinery, the paradox by which, in the long run, all the pleasures that the theater could give are confiscated or retrieved beforehand. Let there be two terms of a representation that operates in such a way that the two terms dissolve for the benefit of a third term which arrives on the scene like a thief: this is the paradox of representation stretched to the point of absurdity. How can the art of the spectacle be refined so far that the stage itself vanishes? By using the Chinese box technique. Not by placing the spectator inside the magic lantern, but by appropriating his senses, his sensibility, his consciousness, his mental and emotional apparatus, through "lofty poetry," by means of various manipulations; the spectator is to be carried away, locked up, and placed under surveillance in the phantasmal box erected by the text around its captives. What does Kreisler find so revolting? On the one hand, it is the reduction of the spectators to a role of marionette with the text pulling the strings; and on the other, the general deterioration of places of rapture and of life: in the poetic process, the theater, stretched to the limit, teeters and then disappears. It gets lost in its own perfection, in the excessiveness of its decor. And the real? The real, it is agreed, should be left outside. Normally, however, in "theaters," the real is not canceled: it is the repudiated term in relation to which the theater defines itself. Without the element of the real, no theatrical effect. The joint effort of the stagehand and the poet consists in pulling down over the theater a fictitious real that masks the theater's "truth"—that is, the machinery, the stage—and breaks down the relationship into a commonplace externality. With one stroke, both the real and the theatrical are annulled. The theater loses its essential theatricality and
opens up onto a sham exterior, which is itself the true fiction—fiction that would insinuate itself as the true reality. And the spectator, no longer aware of his seat in the theater, is carried away on invisible wings to an immaterial land to which he contributes, for the sake of reality, his true tears, his real blood, his genuine laughter, and his all-too-real fears: he is the real within a fiction which he gives life to and which he cannot perceive to be a mere box of words. So what’s the use of the theater? Since it no longer exists . . . do we need theater? We certainly do—we always need the seat, the screen, the couch, as means of passage: the theater serves precisely the function of demolishing that other cumbersome stage, that of the real. It’s the means of transportation. We must reach the imaginary through the metaphor’s self-destruction.

IV. The Theater at the Theater

Kreisler then proclaims a manifesto—against magic. Unite against the poet and the musician! Thwart their plans! “Insofar as these individuals will resort to anything to make the spectator forget he is at the theater, you should, on the contrary, by cleverly arranging sets and machinery, continually remind him of it.” The theater must be presented as a spectacle: so it can bring out its truth and destroy the bogus truth of the setting. Let the impeccability of the labor be manifested as such. The theater must be theatricalized, the phony mystery put to an end, the spectator urged to expose and to control the stage tricks: the spectator must be given the double pleasure of representationalism, that which arises from this appendage at two places at once, which maintains the game value and thus, all at the same time, ousts seriousness, appropriation, alienation, bans all form of possession, but also opens up, between the real and the theatrical, an intermediate and particularly delightful scene in which the transition is accomplished from one term to the other and where all sorts of events cannot help taking place: in this exchange zone, the action and the representation take turns at causing accidents, hybrid, provisional forms, and a whole “story” that crystallizes the difference between these two types of reality in the form of a dust cloud of supplementary effects—a sort of co-reality or perispectacle—that are pure profit for the spectator. Thus, something more is given to enjoy: the actor is at once the personage (with whom he must try to identify himself), the artist, who does an admirable job of identification, and the actual person, who is threatened by on-the-job accidents and who receives a triple ration of sympathy.
when a piece of machinery carefully hung improperly by the stagehand gives way, at the risk of killing three birds with one stone.

At the risk, too, of having Kreisler, or some other, capriciously unroll this surface spread out between auditorium and stage along the real, which continues to the point of becoming a backstage to itself. The stagehand, then, discovers the rationale for his art: not to trick, but to set himself up as the technician of the passage—according to, for example, the model of ravishing glissade proposed by Hoffmann in his texts, as in the Kreisleriana, where he does a demonstration of stylistic figure skating in the letter to the perfect stagehand. In this case it is a question of “sowing” seriousness—not of destroying it or of overthrowing it, but of taking it off its hook and leaving it behind. For this deed, the technique of “curiouser and curiouser” must be used: an emphasis on the real through augmentation, a sort of comparative of internal superiority to the thing described. It would not be, therefore, a measurable, quantitative increase, but an intensification of being, a sort of acceleration in place. Kreisler’s manifesto, which begins at a measurable distance from seriousness—a seriousness with which humor never breaks, takes off with a leap and elaborates a dynamic of suggestion, which carries off humor along a curve, plotted in the manner of a Moebius strip, to the point where the intensity of its reverberation seems to topple it onto its other side—parody. An excessive speed and—where are we reading? We are quite incapable of saying, “This is where seriousness stops”; this is parody. We are let go of in a space that leaves us free to interpret. “Seriousness” encounters at some point the possibility of being overthrown, its limit, the point at which its effects of meaning elude all affirmation: that can mean anything one wishes. It is impossible to attribute to the author any definite position. There is a moment at which it reverberates so strongly that, as in the adventures of Alice, effects precede their causes: first the piece of cake is eaten, then it is cut. And in the theater, first the stagehand is heard yelling, “What an uproar! what a racket!” And then he sets his storm going. In this way, signifier precedes signified: the thunder makes us jump, then it thunders. And the text refers us back to its effects of multiplying incertitude. There will always be extra meaning, space enough for everyone, for each more-than-one, and for each one of me.

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