

caused by the absence of the king – an absence that is an artifice on the part of the painter. But this artifice both conceals and indicates another vacancy which is, on the contrary, immediate: that of the painter and the spectator when they are looking at or composing the picture. It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing – despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits. Around the scene are arranged all the signs and successive forms of representation; but the double relation of the representation to its model and to its sovereign, to its author as well as to the person to whom it is being offered, this relation is necessarily interrupted. It can never be present without some residuum, even in a representation that offers itself as a spectacle. In the depth that traverses the picture, hollowing it into a fictitious recess and projecting it forward in front of itself, it is not possible for the pure felicity of the image ever to present in a full light both the master who is representing and the sovereign who is being represented.

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject – which is the same – has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.

## NOTES

[1] See frontispiece.

Foucault, Michel. "The Prose of the World." The order of things : an archaeology of the human sciences. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. 17-45. Print.

## CHAPTER 2

## The Prose of the World

## I THE FOUR SIMILITUDES

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man. Painting imitated space. And representation – whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge – was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech.

We must pause here for a while, at this moment in time when resemblance was about to relinquish its relation with knowledge and disappear, in part at least, from the sphere of cognition. How, at the end of the sixteenth century, and even in the early seventeenth century, was similitude conceived? How did it organize the figures of knowledge? And if the things that resembled one another were indeed infinite in number, can one, at least, establish the forms according to which they might resemble one another?

The semantic web of resemblance in the sixteenth century is extremely rich: *Amicitia*, *Aequalitas* (*contractus*, *consensus*, *matrimonium*, *societas*, *pax*, *et similia*), *Consonantia*, *Concertus*, *Continuum*, *Paritas*, *Proportio*, *Similitudo*, *Conjunctio*, *Copula*[1]. And there are a great many other notions that intersect, overlap, reinforce, or limit one another on the surface of thought. It is enough for the moment to indicate the principal figures that determine the knowledge of resemblance with their articulations. There are four of these that are, beyond doubt, essential.

First of all, *convenientia*. This word really denotes the adjacency of places more strongly than it does similitude. Those things are 'convenient' which come sufficiently close to one another to be in juxtaposition; their edges touch, their fringes intermingle, the extremity of the one also denotes the beginning of the other. In this way, movement, influences, passions, and properties too, are communicated. So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears. A resemblance that becomes double as soon as one attempts to unravel it: a resemblance of the place, the site upon which nature has placed the two things, and thus a similitude of properties; for in this natural container, the world, adjacency is not an exterior relation between things, but the sign of a relationship, obscure though it may be. And then, from this contact, by exchange, there arise new resemblances; a common regimen becomes necessary; upon the similitude that was the hidden reason for their propinquity is superimposed a resemblance that is the visible effect of that proximity. Body and soul, for example, are doubly 'convenient': the soul had to be made dense, heavy, and terrestrial for God to place it in the very heart of matter. But through this propinquity, the soul receives the movements of the body and assimilates itself to that body, while 'the body is altered and corrupted by the passions of the soul'[2]. In the vast syntax of the world, the different beings adjust themselves to one another; the plant communicates with the animal, the earth with the sea, man with everything around him. Resemblance imposes adjacencies that in their turn guarantee further resemblances. Place and similitude become entangled: we see mosses growing on the outsides of shells, plants in the antlers of stags, a sort of grass on the faces of men; and the strange zoophyte, by mingling together the properties that make it similar to the plants as well as to the animals, also juxtaposes them[3]. All so many signs of 'convenience'.

*Convenientia* is a resemblance connected with space in the form of a graduated scale of proximity. It is of the same order as conjunction and adjustment. This is why it pertains less to the things themselves than to the world in which they exist. The world is simply the universal 'convenience' of things; there are the same number of fishes in the water as there are animals, or objects produced by nature or man, on the land (are there not fishes called *Episcopus*, others called *Catena*, and others called *Priapus*?); the same number of beings in the water and on the surface of the earth as there are in the sky, the inhabitants of the former corresponding with those of the latter; and lastly, there are the same number of beings in the whole of creation as may be found eminently contained in God himself,

'the Sower of Existence, of Power, of Knowledge and of Love'[4]. Thus, by this linking of resemblance with space, this 'convenience' that brings like things together and makes adjacent things similar, the world is linked together like a chain. At each point of contact there begins and ends a link that resembles the one before it and the one after it; and from circle to circle, these similitudes continue, holding the extremes apart (God and matter), yet bringing them together in such a way that the will of the Almighty may penetrate into the most unawakened corners. It is this immense, taut, and vibrating chain, this rope of 'convenience', that Porta evokes in a passage from his *Magie naturelle*:

As with respect to its vegetation the plant stands convenient to the brute beast, so through feeling does the brutish animal to man, who is conformable to the rest of the stars by his intelligence; these links proceed so strictly that they appear as a rope stretched from the first cause as far as the lowest and smallest of things, by a reciprocal and continuous connection; in such wise that the superior virtue, spreading its beams, reaches so far that if we touch one extremity of that cord it will make tremble and move all the rest[5].

The second form of similitude is *aemulatio*: a sort of 'convenience' that has been freed from the law of place and is able to function, without motion, from a distance. Rather as though the spatial collusion of *convenientia* had been broken, so that the links of the chain, no longer connected, reproduced their circles at a distance from one another in accordance with a resemblance that needs no contact. There is something in emulation of the reflection and the mirror: it is the means whereby things scattered through the universe can answer one another. The human face, from afar, emulates the sky, and just as man's intellect is an imperfect reflection of God's wisdom, so his two eyes, with their limited brightness, are a reflection of the vast illumination spread across the sky by sun and moon; the mouth is Venus, since it gives passage to kisses and words of love; the nose provides an image in miniature of Jove's sceptre and Mercury's staff[6]. The relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other without connection or proximity: by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these reflections coursing through space are the original images? Which is the reality and which the projection? It is often not possible to say, for emulation is a sort of natural twinship existing in



things; it arises from a fold in being, the two sides of which stand immediately opposite to one another. Paracelsus compares this fundamental duplication of the world to the image of two twins 'who resemble one another completely, without its being possible for anyone to say which of them brought its similitude to the other' [7].

However, emulation does not leave the two reflected figures it has confronted in a merely inert state of opposition. One may be weaker, and therefore receptive to the stronger influence of the other, which is thus reflected in his passive mirror. Are not the stars, for example, dominant over the plants of the earth, of which they are the unchanged model, the unalterable form, and over which they have been secretly empowered to pour the whole dynasty of their influences? The dark earth is the mirror of the star-sown sky, but the two rivals are neither of equal value nor of equal dignity in that tournament. The bright colours of the flowers reproduce, without violence, the pure form of the sky. As Crollius says:

The stars are the matrix of all the plants and every star in the sky is only the spiritual prefiguration of a plant, such that it represents that plant, and just as each herb or plant is a terrestrial star looking up at the sky, so also each star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which differs from the terrestrial plants in matter alone . . . , the celestial plants and herbs are turned towards the earth and look directly down upon the plants they have procreated, imbuing them with some particular virtue [8].

But the lists may remain open, and the untroubled mirror reflect only the image of 'two wrathful soldiers'. Similitude then becomes the combat of one form against another – or rather of one and the same form separated from itself by the weight of matter or distance in space. Man as Paracelsus describes him is, like the firmament, 'constellated with stars', but he is not bound to it like 'the thief to his galley-oar, the murderer to the wheel, the fish to the fisherman, the quarry to the huntsman'. It pertains to the firmament of man to be 'free and powerful', to 'bow to no order', and 'not to be ruled by any other created beings'. His inner sky may remain autonomous and depend only upon itself, but on condition that by means of his wisdom, which is also knowledge, he comes to resemble the order of the world, takes it back into himself and thus recreates in his inner firmament the sway of that other firmament in which he sees the glitter of the visible stars. If he does this, then the wisdom of the mirror will in turn be reflected back to envelop the world in which it has been placed; its great ring will spin out into the depths of the heavens,

and beyond; man will discover that he contains 'the stars within himself . . . , and that he is thus the bearer of the firmament with all its influences' [9].

Emulation is posited in the first place in the form of a mere reflection, furtive and distant; it traverses the spaces of the universe in silence. But the distance it crosses is not annulled by the subtle metaphor of emulation; it remains open to the eye. And in this duel, the two confronting figures seize upon one another. Like envelops like, which in turn surrounds the other, perhaps to be enveloped once more in a duplication which can continue *ad infinitum*. The links of emulation, unlike the elements of *convenientia*, do not form a chain but rather a series of concentric circles reflecting and rivalling one another.

The third form of similitude is *analogy*. An old concept already familiar to Greek science and medieval thought, but one whose use has probably become different now. In this analogy, *convenientia* and *aemulatio* are superimposed. Like the latter, it makes possible the marvellous confrontation of resemblances across space; but it also speaks, like the former, of adjacencies, of bonds and joints. Its power is immense, for the similitudes of which it treats are not the visible, substantial ones between things themselves; they need only be the more subtle resemblances of relations. Disencumbered thus, it can extend, from a single given point, to an endless number of relationships. For example, the relation of the stars to the sky in which they shine may also be found: between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between minerals such as diamonds and the rocks in which they are buried, between sense organs and the face they animate, between skin moles and the body of which they are the secret marks. An analogy may also be turned around upon itself without thereby rendering itself open to dispute. The old analogy of plant to animal (the vegetable is an animal living head down, its mouth – or roots – buried in the earth), is neither criticized nor disposed of by Cesalpino; on the contrary, he gives it added force, he multiplies it by itself when he makes the discovery that a plant is an upright animal, whose nutritive principles rise from the base up to the summit, channelled along a stem that stretches upwards like a body and is topped by a head – spreading flowers and leaves: a relation that inverts but does not contradict the initial analogy, since it places 'the root in the lower part of the plant and the stem in the upper part, for the venous network in animals also begins in the lower part of the belly, and the principal vein rises up to the heart and head' [10].

This reversibility and this polyvalency endow analogy with a universal field of application. Through it, all the figures in the whole universe can be drawn together. There does exist, however, in this space, furrowed in every direction, one particularly privileged point: it is saturated with analogies (all analogies can find one of their necessary terms there), and as they pass through it, their relations may be inverted without losing any of their force. This point is man: he stands in proportion to the heavens, just as he does to animals and plants, and as he does also to the earth, to metals, to stalactites or storms. Upright between the surfaces of the universe, he stands in relation to the firmament (his face is to his body what the face of heaven is to the ether; his pulse beats in his veins as the stars circle the sky according to their own fixed paths; the seven orifices in his head are to his face what the seven planets are to the sky); but he is also the fulcrum upon which all these relations turn, so that we find them again, their similarity unimpaired, in the analogy of the human animal to the earth it inhabits: his flesh is a glebe, his bones are rocks, his veins great rivers, his bladder is the sea, and his seven principal organs are the metals hidden in the shafts of mines[11]. Man's body is always the possible half of a universal atlas. It is well known how Pierre Belon drew, and drew in the greatest detail, the first comparative illustration of the human skeleton and that of birds: in it, we see

the pinion called the appendix which is in proportion to the wing and in the same place as the thumb on the hand; the extremity of the pinion which is like the fingers in us . . . ; the bone given as legs to the bird corresponding to our heel; just as we have four toes on our feet, so the birds have four fingers of which the one behind is proportionate to the big toe in us[12].

So much precision is not, however, comparative anatomy except to an eye armed with nineteenth-century knowledge. It is merely that the grid through which we permit the figures of resemblance to enter our knowledge happens to coincide at this point (and at almost no other) with that which sixteenth-century learning had laid over things.

In fact, Belon's description has no connection with anything but the positivity which, in his day, made it possible. It is neither more rational nor more scientific than an observation such as Aldrovandi's comparison of man's baser parts to the fouler parts of the world, to Hell, to the darkness of Hell, to the damned souls who are like the excrement of the Universe[13]; it belongs to the same analogical cosmography as the

comparison, classic in Crollius's time, between apoplexy and tempests: the storm begins when the air becomes heavy and agitated, the apoplectic attack at the moment when our thoughts become heavy and disturbed; then the clouds pile up, the belly swells, the thunder explodes and the bladder bursts; the lightning flashes and the eyes glitter with a terrible brightness, the rain falls, the mouth foams, the thunderbolt is unleashed and the spirits burst open breaches in the skin; but then the sky becomes clear again, and in the sick man reason regains ascendancy[14]. The space occupied by analogies is really a space of radiation. Man is surrounded by it on every side; but, inversely, he transmits these resemblances back into the world from which he receives them. He is the great fulcrum of proportions – the centre upon which relations are concentrated and from which they are once again reflected.

Lastly, the fourth form of resemblance is provided by the play of *sympathies*. And here, no path has been determined in advance, no distance laid down, no links prescribed. Sympathy plays through the depths of the universe in a free state. It can traverse the vastest spaces in an instant: it falls like a thunderbolt from the distant planet upon the man ruled by that planet; on the other hand, it can be brought into being by a simple contact – as with those 'mourning roses that have been used at obsequies' which, simply from their former adjacency with death, will render all persons who smell them 'sad and moribund'[15]. But such is its power that sympathy is not content to spring from a single contact and speed through space; it excites the things of the world to movement and can draw even the most distant of them together. It is a principle of mobility: it attracts what is heavy to the heaviness of the earth, what is light up towards the weightless ether; it drives the root towards the water, and it makes the great yellow disk of the sunflower turn to follow the curving path of the sun. Moreover, by drawing things towards one another in an exterior and visible movement, it also gives rise to a hidden interior movement – a displacement of qualities that take over from one another in a series of relays: fire, because it is warm and light, rises up into the air, towards which its flames untiringly strive; but in doing so it loses its dryness (which made it akin to the earth) and so acquires humidity (which links it to water and air); it disappears therefore into light vapour, into blue smoke, into clouds: it has become air. Sympathy is an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent that it will not rest content to be merely one of the forms of likeness; it has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling



them, of causing their individuality to disappear – and thus of rendering them foreign to what they were before. Sympathy transforms. It alters, but in the direction of identity, so that if its power were not counterbalanced it would reduce the world to a point, to a homogeneous mass, to the featureless form of the Same: all its parts would hold together and communicate with one another without a break, with no distance between them, like those metal chains held suspended by sympathy to the attraction of a single magnet[16].

This is why sympathy is compensated for by its twin, antipathy. Antipathy maintains the isolation of things and prevents their assimilation; it encloses every species within its impenetrable difference and its propensity to continue being what it is:

It is fairly widely known that the plants have hatreds between themselves . . . it is said that the olive and the vine hate the cabbage; the cucumber flies from the olive . . . Since they grow by means of the sun's warmth and the earth's humour, it is inevitable that any thick and opaque tree should be pernicious to the others, and also the tree that has several roots[17].

And so to infinity, through all time, the world's beings will hate one another and preserve their ferocious appetites in opposition to all sympathy.

The rat of India is pernicious to the crocodile, since Nature has created them enemies; in such wise that when that violent reptile takes his pleasure in the sun, the rat lays an ambush for it of mortal subtlety; perceiving that the crocodile, lying unaware for delight, is sleeping with its jaws agape, it makes its way through them and slips down the wide throat into the crocodile's belly, gnawing through the entrails of which, it emerges at last from the slain beast's bowel.

But the rat's enemies are lying in wait for it in their turn: for it lives in discord with the spider, and 'battling with the aspic it oft so dies'. Through this play of antipathy, which disperses them, yet draws them with equal force into mutual combat, makes them into murderers and then exposes them to death in their turn, things and animals and all the forms of the world remain what they are.

The identity of things, the fact that they can resemble others and be drawn to them, though without being swallowed up or losing their singularity – this is what is assured by the constant counterbalancing of

sympathy and antipathy. It explains how things grow, develop, intermingle, disappear, die, yet endlessly find themselves again; in short, how there can be space (which is nevertheless not without landmarks or repetitions, not without havens of similitude) and time (which nevertheless allows the same forms, the same species, the same elements to reappear indefinitely).

Though yet of themselves the four bodies (water, air, fire, earth) be simple and possessed of their distinct qualities, yet forasmuch as the Creator has ordained that the elementary bodies shall be composed of mingled elements, therefore are their harmonies and discordancies remarkable, as we may know from their qualities. The element of fire is hot and dry; it has therefore an antipathy to those of water, which is cold and damp. Hot air is humid, cold earth is dry, which is an antipathy. That they may be brought into harmony, air has been placed between fire and water, water between earth and air. Inasmuch as the air is hot, it marches well with fire and its humidity goes well with that of water. The humidity of water is heated by the heat of the air and brings relief to the cold dryness of the earth[18].

Because of the movement and the dispersion created by its laws, the sovereignty of the sympathy-antipathy pair gives rise to all the forms of resemblance. The first three similitudes are thus all resumed and explained by it. The whole volume of the world, all the adjacencies of 'convenience', all the echoes of emulation, all the linkages of analogy, are supported, maintained, and doubled by this space governed by sympathy and antipathy, which are ceaselessly drawing things together and holding them apart. By means of this interplay, the world remains identical; resemblances continue to be what they are, and to resemble one another. The same remains the same, riveted onto itself.

## II SIGNATURES

And yet the system is not closed. One aperture remains: and through it the whole interplay of resemblances would be in danger of escaping from itself, or of remaining hidden in darkness, if there were not a further form of similitude to close the circle – to render it at once perfect and manifest.

*Convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, and sympathy* tell us how the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with

itself so that things can resemble one another. They tell us what the paths of similitude are and the directions they take; but not where it is, how one sees it, or by what mark it may be recognized. Now there is a possibility that we might make our way through all this marvellous teeming abundance of resemblances without even suspecting that it has long been prepared by the order of the world, for our greater benefit. In order that we may know that aconite will cure our eye disease, or that ground walnut mixed with spirits of wine will ease a headache, there must of course be some mark that will make us aware of these things: otherwise, the secret would remain indefinitely dormant. Would we ever know that there is a relation of twinship or rivalry between a man and his planet, if there were no sign upon his body or among the wrinkles on his face that he is an emulator of Mars or akin to Saturn? These buried similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things; there must be visible marks for the invisible analogies. Is not any resemblance, after all, both the most obvious and the most hidden of things? Because it is not made up of juxtaposed fragments, some identical and others different, it is all of a piece, a similitude that can be seen and yet not seen. It would thus lack any criterion if it did not have within it – or above it or beside it – a decisive element to transform its uncertain glimmer into bright certainty.

There are no resemblances without signatures. The world of similarity can only be a world of signs. Paracelsus says:

It is not God's will that what he creates for man's benefit and what he has given us should remain hidden . . . And even though he has hidden certain things, he has allowed nothing to remain without exterior and visible signs in the form of special marks – just as a man who has buried a hoard of treasure marks the spot that he may find it again[19].

A knowledge of similitudes is founded upon the unearthing and decipherment of these signatures. It is useless to go no further than the skin or bark of plants if you wish to know their nature; you must go straight to their marks – 'to the shadow and image of God that they bear or to their internal virtue, which has been given to them by heaven as a natural dowry, . . . a virtue, I say, that is to be recognized rather by its signature'[20]. The system of signatures reverses the relation of the visible to the invisible. Resemblance was the invisible form of that which, from the depths of the world, made things visible; but in order that this form may be brought out into the light in its turn there must be a visible figure that will draw it out from its profound invisibility. This is why

the face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words – with 'hieroglyphics', as Turner called them. And the space inhabited by immediate resemblances becomes like a vast open book; it bristles with written signs; every page is seen to be filled with strange figures that intertwine and in some places repeat themselves. All that remains is to decipher them: 'Is it not true that all herbs, plants, trees and other things issuing from the bowels of the earth are so many magic books and signs?'[21] The great untroubled mirror in whose depths things gazed at themselves and reflected their own images back to one another is, in reality, filled with the murmur of words. The mute reflections all have corresponding words which indicate them. And by the grace of one final form of resemblance, which envelops all the others and encloses them within a single circle, the world may be compared to a man with the power of speech:

Just as the secret movements of his understanding are manifested by his voice, so it would seem that the herbs speak to the curious physician through their signatures, discovering to him . . . their inner virtues hidden beneath nature's veil of silence[22].

But we must pause a little here to examine this language itself. To examine the signs of which it is made up and the way in which these signs refer back to what they indicate.

There exists a sympathy between aconite and our eyes. This unexpected affinity would remain in obscurity if there were not some signature on the plant, some mark, some word, as it were, telling us that it is good for diseases of the eye. This sign is easily legible in its seeds: they are tiny dark globes set in white skinlike coverings whose appearance is much like that of eyelids covering an eye[23]. It is the same with the affinity of the walnut and the human head: what cures 'wounds of the pericranium' is the thick green rind covering the bones – the shell – of the fruit; but internal head ailments may be prevented by use of the nut itself 'which is exactly like the brain in appearance'[24]. The sign of affinity, and what renders it visible, is quite simply analogy; the cipher of sympathy resides in the proportion.

But what signature can the proportion itself bear in order to make itself recognizable? How is one to know that the lines of a hand or the furrows on a brow are tracing on a man's body the tendencies, accidents, or obstacles present in the whole vast fabric of his life? How indeed, if not because we know that sympathy creates communication between our



bodies and the heavens, and transmits the movement of the planets to the affairs of men. And if not, too, because the shortness of a line reflects the simple image of a short life, the intersection of two furrows an obstacle in one's path, the upward direction of a wrinkle a man's rise to success. Breadth is a sign of wealth and importance; continuity denotes good fortune, discontinuity ill fortune[25]. The great analogy between body and destiny has its sign in the whole system of mirrors and attractions. It is sympathies and emulations that indicate analogies.

Emulation may be recognized by analogy: the eyes are stars because they spread light over our faces just as stars light up the darkness, and because blind people exist in the world like clairvoyants in the darkest of nights. It can also be recognized through *convenientia*: we have known, ever since the Greeks, that the strongest and bravest animals have large and well-developed extremities to their limbs, as though their strength had communicated itself to the most distant parts of their bodies. In the same way, man's face and hands must resemble the soul to which they are joined. The recognition of the most visible similitudes occurs, therefore, against a background of the discovery that things in general are 'convenient' among themselves. And if one then considers that convenience is not always defined by actual localization, but that many beings separated in space are also 'convenient' (as with a disease and its remedy, man and his stars, or a plant and the soil it needs), then again a sign of their convenience is essential. And what other sign is there that two things are linked to one another unless it is that they have a mutual attraction for each other, as do the sun and the sunflower, or water and a cucumber shoot, that there is an affinity and, as it were, a sympathy between them?

And so the circle is closed. Though it is apparent what a complicated system of duplications was necessary to achieve this. Resemblances require a signature, for none of them would ever become observable were it not legibly marked. But what are these signs? How, amid all the aspects of the world and so many interlacing forms, does one recognize that one is faced at any given moment with a character that should give one pause because it indicates a secret and essential resemblance? What form constitutes a sign and endows it with its particular value as a sign? — Resemblance does. It signifies exactly in so far as it resembles what it is indicating (that is, a similitude). But what it indicates is not the homology for its distinct existence as a signature would then be indistinguishable from the face of which it is the sign; it is *another* resemblance, an adjacent

similitude, one of another type which enables us to recognize the first, and which is revealed in its turn by a third. Every resemblance receives a signature; but this signature is no more than an intermediate form of the same resemblance. As a result, the totality of these marks, sliding over the great circle of similitudes, forms a second circle which would be an exact duplication of the first, point by point, were it not for that tiny degree of displacement which causes the sign of sympathy to reside in an analogy, that of analogy in emulation, that of emulation in convenience, which in turn requires the mark of sympathy for its recognition. The signature and what it denotes are of exactly the same nature; it is merely that they obey a different law of distribution; the pattern from which they are cut is the same.

The form making a sign and the form being signalized are resemblances, but they do not overlap. And it is in this respect that resemblance in sixteenth-century knowledge is without doubt the most universal thing there is: at the same time that which is most clearly visible, yet something that one must nevertheless search for, since it is also the most hidden; what determines the form of knowledge (for knowledge can only follow the paths of similitude), and what guarantees its wealth of content (for the moment one lifts aside the signs and looks at what they indicate, one allows Resemblance itself to emerge into the light of day and shine with its own inner light).

Let us call the totality of the learning and skills that enable one to make the signs speak and to discover their meaning, hermeneutics; let us call the totality of the learning and skills that enable one to distinguish the location of the signs, to define what constitutes them as signs, and to know how and by what laws they are linked, semiology: the sixteenth century superimposed hermeneutics and semiology in the form of similitude. To search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance. To search for the law governing signs is to discover the things that are alike. The grammar of beings is an exegesis of these things. And what the language they speak has to tell us is quite simply what the syntax is that binds them together. The nature of things, their coexistence, the way in which they are linked together and communicate is nothing other than their resemblance. And that resemblance is visible only in the network of signs that crosses the world from one end to the other. 'Nature' is trapped in the thin layer that holds semiology and hermeneutics one above the other; it is neither mysterious nor veiled, it offers itself to our cognition, which it sometimes leads astray, only in so far as this superimposition

necessarily includes a slight degree of non-coincidence between the resemblances. As a result, the grid is less easy to see through; its transparency is clouded over from the very first. A dark space appears which must be made progressively clearer. That space is where 'nature' resides, and it is what one must attempt to know. Everything would be manifest and immediately knowable if the hermeneutics of resemblance and the semiology of signatures coincided without the slightest parallax. But because the similitudes that form the graphics of the world are one 'cog' out of alignment with those that form its discourse, knowledge and the infinite labour it involves find here the space that is proper to them: it is their task to weave their way across this distance, pursuing an endless zigzag course from resemblance to what resembles it.

## III THE LIMITS OF THE WORLD

Such, sketched in its most general aspects, is the sixteenth-century *episteme*. This configuration carries with it a certain number of consequences.

First and foremost, the plethoric yet absolutely poverty-stricken character of this knowledge. Plethoric because it is limitless. Resemblance never remains stable within itself; it can be fixed only if it refers back to another similitude, which then, in turn, refers to others; each resemblance, therefore, has value only from the accumulation of all the others, and the whole world must be explored if even the slightest of analogies is to be justified and finally take on the appearance of certainty. It is therefore a knowledge that can, and must, proceed by the infinite accumulation of confirmations all dependent on one another. And for this reason, from its very foundations, this knowledge will be a thing of sand. The only possible form of link between the elements of this knowledge is addition. Hence those immense columns of compilation, hence their monotony. By positing resemblance as the link between signs and what they indicate (thus making resemblance both a third force and a sole power, since it resides in both the mark and the content in identical fashion), sixteenth-century knowledge condemned itself to never knowing anything but the same thing, and to knowing that thing only at the unattainable end of an endless journey.

And it is here that we find that only too well-known category, the microcosm, coming into play. This ancient notion was no doubt revived, during the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, by a

certain neo-Platonist tradition. But by the sixteenth century it had come to play a fundamental role in the field of knowledge. It hardly matters whether it was or was not, as was once claimed, a world view or *Weltanschauung*. The fact is that it had one, or rather two, precise functions in the epistemological configuration of this period. As a *category of thought*, it applies the interplay of duplicated resemblances to all the realms of nature; it provides all investigation with an assurance that everything will find its mirror and its macrocosmic justification on another and larger scale; it affirms, inversely, that the visible order of the highest spheres will be found reflected in the darkest depths of the earth. But, understood as a *general configuration* of nature, it poses real and, as it were, tangible limits to the indefatigable to-and-fro of similitudes relieving one another. It indicates that there exists a greater world, and that its perimeter defines the limit of all created things; that at the far extremity of this great world there exists a privileged creation which reproduces, within its restricted dimensions, the immense order of the heavens, the stars, the mountains, rivers, and storms; and that it is between the effective limits of this constituent analogy that the interplay of resemblances takes place. By this very fact, however immense the distance from microcosm to macrocosm may be, it cannot be infinite; the beings that reside within it may be extremely numerous, but in the end they can be counted; and, consequently, the similitudes that, through the action of the signs they require, always rest one upon another, can cease their endless flight. They have a perfectly closed domain to support and buttress them. Nature, like the interplay of signs and resemblances, is closed in upon itself in conformity with the duplicated form of the cosmos.

We must therefore be careful not to invert the relations here. There is no doubt that the idea of the microcosm was, as we say, 'important' in the sixteenth century; it would probably have been one of the most frequently mentioned terms in the results of any poll taken at the time. But we are not concerned here with a study of opinions, which could be undertaken only by a statistical analysis of contemporary records. If, on the other hand, one investigates sixteenth-century knowledge at its archaeological level – that is, at the level of what made it possible – then the relations of macrocosm and microcosm appear as a mere surface effect. It was not because people believed in such relations that they set about trying to hunt down all the analogies in the world. But there was a necessity lying at the heart of their knowledge: they had to find an adjustment between the infinite richness of a resemblance introduced as a third



term between signs and their meaning, and the monotony that imposed the same pattern of resemblance upon the sign and what it signified. In an *episteme* in which signs and similitudes were wrapped around one another in an endless spiral, it was essential that the relation of microcosm to macrocosm should be conceived as both the guarantee of that knowledge and the limit of its expansion.

It was this same necessity that obliged knowledge to accept magic and erudition on the same level. To us, it seems that sixteenth-century learning was made up of an unstable mixture of rational knowledge, notions derived from magical practices, and a whole cultural heritage whose power and authority had been vastly increased by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman authors. Perceived thus, the learning of that period appears structurally weak: a common ground where fidelity to the Ancients, a taste for the supernatural, and an already awakened awareness of that sovereign rationality in which we recognize ourselves, confronted one another in equal freedom. And this tripartite period would consequently be reflected in the mirror of each work and each divided mind occurring within it. . . . In fact, it is not from an insufficiency of structure that sixteenth-century knowledge suffers. On the contrary, we have already seen how very meticulous the configurations are that define its space. It is this very rigour that makes the relation of magic to erudition inevitable – they are not selected contents but required forms. The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things.

But we men discover all that is hidden in the mountains by signs and outward correspondences; and it is thus that we find out all the properties of herbs and all that is in stones. There is nothing in the depths of the seas, nothing in the heights of the firmament that man is not capable of discovering. There is no mountain so vast that it can hide from the gaze of man what is within it; it is revealed to him by corresponding signs[26].

Divination is not a rival form of knowledge; it is part of the main body of knowledge itself. Moreover, these signs that must be interpreted indicate what is hidden only in so far as they resemble it; and it is not possible to act upon those marks without at the same time operating upon

that which is secretly indicated by them. This is why the plants that represent the head, or the eyes, or the heart, or the liver, will possess an efficacy in regard to that organ; this is why the animals themselves will react to the marks that designate them. Paracelsus asks:

Tell me, then, why snakes in Helvetia, Algoria, Swedland understand the Greek words *Osy*, *Osy*, *Osy* . . . In what academies did they learn them, so that scarcely have they heard the word than they immediately turn tail in order not to hear it again? Scarcely do they hear the word when, notwithstanding their nature and their spirit, they remain immobile and poison no one with their venomous wounds.

And let no one say that this is merely the effect of the sound made by the words when pronounced: 'If you write these words alone on vellum, parchment or paper at a favourable time, then place them in front of the serpent, it will stay no less motionless than if you had pronounced them aloud.' The project of elucidating the 'Natural Magics', which occupies an important place at the end of the sixteenth century and survives into the middle of the seventeenth, is not a vestigial phenomenon in the European consciousness; it was revived – as Campanella expressly tells us[27] – and for contemporary reasons: because the fundamental configuration of knowledge consisted of the reciprocal cross-reference of signs and similitudes. The form of magic was inherent in this way of knowing.

And by the same token, so was erudition: for, in the treasure handed down to us by Antiquity, the value of language lay in the fact that it was the sign of things. There is no difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition. The relation to these texts is of the same nature as the relation to things: in both cases there are signs that must be discovered. But God, in order to exercise our wisdom, merely sowed nature with forms for us to decipher (and it is in this sense that knowledge should be *divinatio*), whereas the Ancients have already provided us with interpretations, which we need do no more than gather together. Or which we would need only to gather together, were it not for the necessity of learning their language, reading their texts, and understanding what they have said. The heritage of Antiquity, like nature itself, is a vast space requiring interpretation; in both cases there are signs to be discovered and then, little by little,

made to speak. In other words, *divinatio* and *eruditio* are both part of the same hermeneutics; but this develops, following similar forms, on two different levels: one moves from the mute sign to the thing itself (and makes nature speak); the other moves from the unmoving graphism to clear speech (it restores sleeping languages to life). But just as natural signs are linked to what they indicate by the profound relation of resemblance, so the discourse of the Ancients is in the image of what it expresses; if it has the value of a precious sign, that is because, from the depth of its being, and by means of the light that has never ceased to shine through it since its origin, it is adjusted to things themselves, it forms a mirror for them and emulates them; it is to eternal truth what signs are to the secrets of nature (it is the mark whereby the word may be deciphered); and it possesses an ageless affinity with the things that it unveils. It is useless therefore to demand its title to authority; it is a treasury of signs linked by similitude to that which they are empowered to denote. The only difference is that we are dealing with a treasure-hoard of the second degree, one that refers to the notations of nature, which in their turn indicate obscurely the pure gold of things themselves. The truth of all these marks – whether they are woven into nature itself or whether they exist in lines on parchments and in libraries – is everywhere the same: coeval with the institution of God.

There is no difference between marks and words in the sense that there is between observation and accepted authority, or between verifiable fact and tradition. The process is everywhere the same: that of the sign and its likeness, and this is why nature and the word can intertwine with one another to infinity, forming, for those who can read it, one vast single text.

#### IV THE WRITING OF THINGS

In the sixteenth century, real language is not a totality of independent signs, a uniform and unbroken entity in which things could be reflected one by one, as in a mirror, and so express their particular truths. It is rather an opaque, mysterious thing, closed in upon itself, a fragmented mass, its enigma renewed in every interval, which combines here and there with the forms of the world and becomes interwoven with them: so much so that all these elements, taken together, form a network of marks in which each of them may play, and does in fact play, in relation to all the others, the role of content or of sign, that of secret or of indicator.

In its raw, historical sixteenth-century being, language is not an arbitrary system; it has been set down in the world and forms a part of it, both because things themselves hide and manifest their own enigma like a language and because words offer themselves to men as things to be deciphered. The great metaphor of the book that one opens, that one pores over and reads in order to know nature, is merely the reverse and visible side of another transference, and a much deeper one, which forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals.

Language partakes in the world-wide dissemination of similitudes and signatures. It must, therefore, be studied itself as a thing in nature. Like animals, plants, or stars, its elements have their laws of affinity and convenience, their necessary analogies. Ramus divided his grammar into two parts. The first was devoted to etymology, which means that one looked in it to discover, not the original meanings of words, but the intrinsic 'properties' of letters, syllables, and, finally, whole words. The second part dealt with syntax: its purpose was to teach 'the building of words together by means of their properties', and it consisted 'almost entirely in the convenience and mutual communion of properties, as of the noun with the noun or with the verb, of the adverb with all the words to which it is adjoined, of the conjunction in the order of things conjoined'[28]. Language is not what it is because it has a meaning; its representative content, which was to have such importance for grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it provided them with the guiding thread of their analyses, has no role to play here. Words group syllables together, and syllables letters, because there are virtues placed in individual letters that draw them towards each other or keep them apart, exactly as the marks found in nature also repel or attract one another. The study of grammar in the sixteenth century is based upon the same epistemological arrangement as the science of nature or the esoteric disciplines. The only differences are that there is only one nature and there are several languages; and that in the esoteric field the properties of words, syllables, and letters are discovered by another discourse which always remains secret, whereas in grammar it is the words and phrases of everyday life that themselves express their properties. Language stands halfway between the visible forms of nature and the secret conveniences of esoteric discourse. It is a fragmented nature, divided against itself and deprived of its original transparency by admixture; it is a secret that carries within itself, though near the surface, the decipherable signs of what it



is trying to say. It is at the same time a buried revelation and a revelation that is gradually being restored to ever greater clarity.

In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude. This transparency was destroyed at Babel as a punishment for men. Languages became separated and incompatible with one another only in so far as they had previously lost this original resemblance to the things that had been the prime reason for the existence of language. All the languages known to us are now spoken only against the background of this lost similitude, and in the space that it left vacant. There is only one language that retains a memory of that similitude, because it derives in direct descent from that first vocabulary which is now forgotten; because God did not wish men to forget the punishment inflicted at Babel; because this language had to be used in order to recount God's ancient Alliance with his people; and lastly, because it was in this language that God addressed himself to those who listened to him. Hebrew therefore contains, as if in the form of fragments, the marks of that original name-giving. And those words pronounced by Adam as he imposed them upon the various animals have endured, in part at least, and still carry with them in their density, like an embedded fragment of silent knowledge, the unchanging properties of beings:

Thus the stork, so greatly lauded for its charity towards its father and its mother, is called in Hebrew *Chasida*, which is to say, meek, charitable, endowed with pity . . . The horse is named *Sus*, thought to be from the verb *Hasas*, unless that verb is rather derived from the noun, and it signifies to rise up, for among all four-footed animals the horse is most proud and brave, as Job depicts it in Chapter 39[29].

But these are no more than fragmentary monuments; all other languages have lost these radical similitudes, which have been preserved in Hebrew only in order to show that it was once the common language of God, Adam, and the animals of the newly created earth.

But though language no longer bears an immediate resemblance to the things it names, this does not mean that it is separate from the world; it still continues, in another form, to be the locus of revelations and to be included in the area where truth is both manifested and expressed. True,

it is no longer nature in its primal visibility, but neither is it a mysterious instrument with powers known only to a few privileged persons. It is rather the figuration of a world redeeming itself, lending its ear at last to the true word. This is why it was God's wish that Latin, the language of his Church, should spread over the whole of the terrestrial globe. And it is also why all the languages of the world, as it became possible to know them through this conquest, make up together the image of the truth. Their interlacing and the space in which they are deployed free the sign of the redeemed world, just as the arrangement of the first names bore a likeness to the things that God had given to Adam for his use. Claude Duret points out that the Hebrews, the Canaans, the Samaritans, the Chaldeans, the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Carthaginians, the Phoenicians, the Arabs, the Saracens, the Turks, the Moors, the Persians, and the Tartars all write from right to left, following 'the course and daily movement of the first heaven, which is most perfect, according to the opinion of the great Aristotle, tending towards unity'; the Greeks, the Georgians, the Maronites, the Serbians, the Jacobites, the Copts, the Poznanians, and of course the Romans and all Europeans write from left to right, following 'the course and movement of the second heaven, home of the seven planets'; the Indians, Cathayans, Chinese, and Japanese write from top to bottom, in conformity with the 'order of nature, which has given men heads at the tops of their bodies and feet at the bottom'; 'in opposition to the aforementioned', the Mexicans write either from bottom to top or else in 'spiral lines, such as those made by the sun in its annual journey through the Zodiac'. And thus 'by these five diverse sorts of writing the secrets and mysteries of the world's frame and the form of the cross, the unity of the heaven's rotundity and that of the earth, are properly denoted and expressed'[30]. The relation of languages to the world is one of analogy rather than of signification; or rather, their value as signs and their duplicating function are superimposed; they speak the heaven and the earth of which they are the image; they reproduce in their most material architecture the cross whose coming they announce – that coming which establishes its existence in its own turn through the Scriptures and the Word. Language possesses a symbolic function; but since the disaster at Babel we must no longer seek for it – with rare exceptions[31] – in the words themselves but rather in the very existence of language, in its total relation to the totality of the world, in the intersecting of its space with the loci and forms of the cosmos.

Hence the form of the encyclopaedic project as it appears at the end of

the sixteenth century or in the first years of the seventeenth: not to reflect what one knows in the neutral element of language – the use of the alphabet as an arbitrary but efficacious encyclopaedic order does not appear until the second half of the seventeenth century[32] – but to reconstitute the very order of the universe by the way in which words are linked together and arranged in space. It is this project that we find in Grégoire's *Syntaxeon artis mirabilis* (1610), and in Alstedius's *Encyclopaedia* (1630); or again in the *Tableau de tous les arts libéraux* by Christophe de Savigny, who contrives to spatialize acquired knowledge both in accordance with the cosmic, unchanging, and perfect form of the circle and in accordance with the sublunary, perishable, multiple, and divided form of the tree; it is also to be found in the work of La Croix du Maine, who envisages a space that would be at once an Encyclopaedia and a Library, and would permit the arrangement of written texts according to the forms of adjacency, kinship, analogy, and subordination prescribed by the world itself[33]. But in any case, such an interweaving of language and things, in a space common to both, presupposes an absolute privilege on the part of writing.

This privilege dominated the entire Renaissance, and was no doubt one of the great events in Western culture. Printing, the arrival in Europe of Oriental manuscripts, the appearance of a literature no longer created for the voice or performance and therefore not governed by them, the precedence given to the interpretation of religious texts over the tradition and magisterium of the Church – all these things bear witness, without its being possible to indicate causes and effects, to the fundamental place accorded in the West to Writing. Henceforth, it is the primal nature of language to be written. The sounds made by voices provide no more than a transitory and precarious translation of it. What God introduced into the world was written words; Adam, when he imposed their first names upon the animals, did no more than read those visible and silent marks; the Law was entrusted to the Tables, not to men's memories; and it is in a book that the true Word must be found again. Vigenère and Duret[34] both said – and in almost identical terms – that the written had always preceded the spoken, certainly in nature, and perhaps even in the knowledge of men. For it was very possible that before Babel, before the Flood, there had already existed a form of writing composed of the marks of nature itself, with the result that its characters would have had the power to act upon things directly, to attract them or repel them, to represent their properties, their virtues, and their secrets. A primitively

natural writing, of which certain forms of esoteric knowledge, and the cabala first and foremost, may perhaps have preserved the scattered memory and were now attempting to retrieve its long-dormant powers. Esoterism in the sixteenth century is a phenomenon of the written word, not the spoken word. At all events, the latter is stripped of all its powers; it is merely the female part of language, Vigenère and Duret tell us, just as its intellect is passive; Writing, on the other hand, is the active intellect, the 'male principle' of language. It alone harbours the truth.

This primacy of the written word explains the twin presence of two forms which, despite their apparent antagonism, are indissociable in sixteenth-century knowledge. The first of these is a non-distinction between what is seen and what is read, between observation and relation, which results in the constitution of a single, unbroken surface in which observation and language intersect to infinity. And the second, the inverse of the first, is an immediate dissociation of all language, duplicated, without any assignable term, by the constant reiteration of commentary.

Later, Buffon was to express astonishment at finding in the work of a naturalist like Aldrovandi such an inextricable mixture of exact descriptions, reported quotations, fables without commentary, remarks dealing indifferently with an animal's anatomy, its use in heraldry, its habitat, its mythological values, or the uses to which it could be put in medicine or magic. And indeed, when one goes back to take a look at the *Historia serpentum et draconum*, one finds the chapter 'On the serpent in general' arranged under the following headings: equivocation (which means the various meanings of the word *serpent*), synonyms and etymologies, differences, form and description, anatomy, nature and habits, temperament, coitus and generation, voice, movements, places, diet, physiognomy, antipathy, sympathy, modes of capture, death and wounds caused by the serpent, modes and signs of poisoning, remedies, epithets, denominations, prodigies and presages, monsters, mythology, gods to which it is dedicated, fables, allegories and mysteries, hieroglyphics, emblems and symbols, proverbs, coinage, miracles, riddles, devices, heraldic signs, historical facts, dreams, simulacra and statues, use in human diet, use in medicine, miscellaneous uses. Whereupon Buffon comments: 'Let it be judged after that what proportion of natural history is to be found in such a hotch-potch of writing. There is no description here, only legend.' And indeed, for Aldrovandi and his contemporaries, it was all *legenda* – things to be read. But the reason for this was not that they preferred the authority of men to the precision of an unprejudiced eye, but that nature,



in itself, is an unbroken tissue of words and signs, of accounts and characters, of discourse and forms. When one is faced with the task of writing an animal's *history*, it is useless and impossible to choose between the profession of naturalist and that of compiler: one has to collect together into one and the same form of knowledge all that has been *seen* and *heard*, all that has been *recounted*, either by nature or by men, by the language of the world, by tradition, or by the poets. To know an animal or a plant, or any terrestrial thing whatever, is to gather together the whole dense layer of signs with which it or they may have been covered; it is to rediscover also all the constellations of forms from which they derive their value as heraldic signs. Aldrovandi was neither a better nor a worse observer than Buffon; he was neither more credulous than he, nor less attached to the faithfulness of the observing eye or to the rationality of things. His observation was simply not linked to things in accordance with the same system or by the same arrangement of the *episteme*. For Aldrovandi was meticulously contemplating a nature which was, from top to bottom, written.

Knowledge therefore consisted in relating one form of language to another form of language; in restoring the great, unbroken plain of words and things; in making everything speak. That is, in bringing into being, at a level above that of all marks, the secondary discourse of commentary. The function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating; it is interpreting. Scriptural commentary, commentaries on Ancient authors, commentaries on the accounts of travellers, commentaries on legends and fables: none of these forms of discourse is required to justify its claim to be expressing a truth before it is interpreted; all that is required of it is the possibility of talking about it. Language contains its own inner principle of proliferation. 'There is more work in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting things; and more books about books than on any other subject; we do nothing but write glosses on one another' [35]. These words are not a statement of the bankruptcy of a culture buried beneath its own monuments; they are a definition of the inevitable relation that language maintained with itself in the sixteenth century. This relation enabled language to accumulate to infinity, since it never ceased to develop, to revise itself, and to lay its successive forms one over another. Perhaps for the first time in Western culture, we find revealed the absolutely open dimension of a language no longer able to halt itself, because, never being enclosed in a definitive statement, it can express its truth only in some future discourse and is wholly intent on what it will

have said; but even this future discourse itself does not have the power to halt the progression, and what it says is enclosed within it like a promise, a bequest to yet another discourse. . . . The task of commentary can never, by definition, be completed. And yet commentary is directed entirely towards the enigmatic, murmured element of the language being commented on: it calls into being, below the existing discourse, another discourse that is more fundamental and, as it were, 'more primal', which it sets itself the task of restoring. There can be no commentary unless, below the language one is reading and deciphering, there runs the sovereignty of an original Text. And it is this text which, by providing a foundation for the commentary, offers its ultimate revelation as the promised reward of commentary. The necessary proliferation of the exegesis is therefore measured, ideally limited, and yet ceaselessly animated, by this silent dominion. The language of the sixteenth century – understood not as an episode in the history of any one tongue, but as a global cultural experience – found itself caught, no doubt, between these interacting elements, in the interstice occurring between the primal Text and the infinity of Interpretation. One speaks upon the basis of a writing that is part of the fabric of the world; one speaks about it to infinity, and each of its signs becomes in turn written matter for further discourse; but each of these stages of discourse is addressed to that primal written word whose return it simultaneously promises and postpones.

It will be seen that the experience of language belongs to the same archaeological network as the knowledge of things and nature. To know those things was to bring to light the system of resemblances that made them close to and dependent upon one another; but one could discover the similitudes between them only in so far as there existed, on their surface, a totality of signs forming the text of an unequivocal message. But then, these signs themselves were no more than a play of resemblances, and they referred back to the infinite and necessarily uncompleted task of knowing what is similar. In the same way, though the analogy is inverted, language sets itself the task of restoring an absolutely primal discourse, but it can express that discourse only by trying to approximate to it, by attempting to say things about it that are similar to it, thereby bringing into existence the infinity of adjacent and similar fidelities of interpretation. The commentary resembles endlessly that which it is commenting upon and which it can never express; just as the knowledge of nature constantly finds new signs for resemblance because resemblance cannot be known in itself, even though the signs can never be anything but

similitudes. And just as this infinite play within nature finds its link, its form, and its limitation in the relation of the microcosm to the macrocosm, so does the infinite task of commentary derive its strength from the promise of an effectively written text which interpretation will one day reveal in its entirety.

## V THE BEING OF LANGUAGE

Ever since the Stoics, the system of signs in the Western world had been a ternary one, for it was recognized as containing the significant, the signified, and the 'conjuncture' (the *τύγχανον*). From the seventeenth century, on the other hand, the arrangement of signs was to become binary, since it was to be defined, with Port-Royal, as the connection of a significant and a signified. At the Renaissance, the organization is different, and much more complex: it is ternary, since it requires the formal domain of marks, the content indicated by them, and the similitudes that link the marks to the things designated by them; but since resemblance is the form of the signs as well as their content, the three distinct elements of this articulation are resolved into a single form.

This arrangement, together with the interplay it authorizes, is found also, though inverted, in the experience of language. In fact, language exists first of all, in its raw and primitive being, in the simple, material form of writing, a stigma upon things, a mark imprinted across the world which is a part of its most ineffaceable forms. In a sense, this layer of language is unique and absolute. But it also gives rise to two other forms of discourse which provide it with a frame: above it, there is commentary, which recasts the given signs to serve a new purpose, and below it, the text, whose primacy is presupposed by commentary to exist hidden beneath the marks visible to all. Hence there are three levels of language, all based upon the single being of the written word. It is this complex interaction of elements that was to disappear with the end of the Renaissance. And in two ways: because the forms oscillating endlessly between one and three terms were to be fixed in a binary form which would render them stable; and because language, instead of existing as the material writing of things, was to find its area of being restricted to the general organization of representative signs.

This new arrangement brought about the appearance of a new problem, unknown until then: in the sixteenth century, one asked oneself how it was possible to know that a sign did in fact designate what it signified;

from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified. A question to which the Classical period was to reply by the analysis of representation; and to which modern thought was to reply by the analysis of meaning and signification. But given the fact itself, language was never to be anything more than a particular case of representation (for the Classics) or of signification (for us). The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved. The primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer, in which the *seen* and the *read*, the visible and the expressible, were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were to be separated from one another. The eye was thenceforth destined to see and only to see, the ear to hear and only to hear. Discourse was still to have the task of speaking that which is, but it was no longer to be anything more than what it said.

This involved an immense reorganization of culture, a reorganization of which the Classical age was the first and perhaps the most important stage, since it was responsible for the new arrangement in which we are still caught – since it is the Classical age that separates us from a culture in which the signification of signs did not exist, because it was reabsorbed into the sovereignty of the Like; but in which their enigmatic, monotonous, stubborn, and primitive being shone in an endless dispersion.

There is nothing now, either in our knowledge or in our reflection, that still recalls even the memory of that being. Nothing, except perhaps literature – and even then in a fashion more allusive and diagonal than direct. It may be said in a sense that 'literature', as it was constituted and so designated on the threshold of the modern age, manifests, at a time when it was least expected, the reappearance, of the living being of language. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the peculiar existence and ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in the fabric of the world were dissolved in the functioning of representation; all language had value only as discourse. The art of language was a way of 'making a sign' – of simultaneously signifying something and arranging signs around that thing; an art of naming, therefore, and then, by means of a reduplication both demonstrative and decorative, of capturing that name, of enclosing and concealing it, of designating it in turn by other names that were the deferred presence of the first name, its secondary sign, its figuration, its rhetorical panoply. And yet, throughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day – from Hölderlin to Mallarmé and on to Antonin Artaud – literature achieved autonomous existence, and



separated itself from all other language with a deep scission, only by forming a sort of 'counter-discourse', and by finding its way back from the representative or signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century.

It is possible to believe that one has attained the very essence of literature when one is no longer interrogating it at the level of what it says but only in its significant form: in doing so, one is limiting one's view of language to its Classical status. In the modern age, literature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language. Through literature, the being of language shines once more on the frontiers of Western culture – and at its centre – for it is what has been most foreign to that culture since the sixteenth century; but it has also, since this same century, been at the very centre of what Western culture has overlain. This is why literature is appearing more and more as that which must be thought; but equally, and for the same reason, as that which can never, in any circumstance, be thought in accordance with a theory of signification. Whether one analyses it from the point of view of what is signified (of what it is trying to say, of its 'ideas', of what it promises, or of what it commits one to) or from the point of view of that which signifies (with the help of paradigms borrowed from linguistics or psychoanalysis) matters little: all that is merely incidental. In both cases one would be searching for it outside the ground in which, as regards our culture, it has never ceased for the past century and a half to become into being and to imprint itself. Such modes of decipherment belong to a Classical situation of language – the situation that predominated during the seventeenth century, when the organization of signs became binary, and when signification was reflected in the form of the representation; for at that time literature really was composed of a signifying element and a signified content, so that it was proper to analyse it accordingly. But from the nineteenth century, literature began to bring language back to light once more in its own being: though not as it had still appeared at the end of the Renaissance. For now we no longer have that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth, language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day.

## NOTES

- [1] P. Grégoire, *Syntaxeon ar.*
- [2] G. Porta, *La Physionomie humaine* (Fr. trans. 1655, p. 1).
- [3] U. Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia* (Bononiae, 1647, p. 663).
- [4] T. Campanella, *Realis philosophia* (Frankfurt, 1623, p. 98).
- [5] G. Porta, *Magie naturelle* (Fr. trans. Rouen, 1650, p. 22).
- [6] Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, p. 3.
- [7] Paracelsus, *Liber Paramirum* (trans. Grillet de Givry, Paris, 1913, p. 3).
- [8] O. Crollius, *Traité des signatures* (Fr. trans. Lyon, 1624, p. 18).
- [9] Paracelsus, loc. cit.
- [10] Cesalpino, *De plantis libri*, XVI (1583).
- [11] Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 88.
- [12] P. Belon, *Histoire de la nature des oiseaux* (Paris, 1555, p. 37).
- [13] Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, p. 4.
- [14] Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 87.
- [15] Porta, *Magie naturelle*, p. 72.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] J. Cardan, *De la subtilité* (Fr. trans. Paris, 1656, p. 154).
- [18] S.G.S. *Annotations au Grand Miroir du Monde de Duchesne*, p. 498.
- [19] Paracelsus, *Die 9 Bücher der Natura Rerum* (*Works*, ed. Suhdorff, vol. IX, p. 393).
- [20] Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 4.
- [21] Ibid., p. 6.
- [22] Ibid., p. 6.
- [23] Ibid., p. 33.
- [24] Ibid., pp. 33–4.
- [25] J. Cardan, *Métoposcopie* (1658 edn., pp. iii–viii).
- [26] Paracelsus, *Archidoxis magica* (Fr. trans. 1909, pp. 21–3).
- [27] T. Campanella, *De sensu rerum et magia* (Frankfurt, 1620).
- [28] P. Ramus, *Grammaire* (Paris, 1572, p. 3 and pp. 125–6).
- [29] Claude Duret, *Trésor de l'histoire des langues* (Cologne, 1613, p. 40).
- [30] Duret, loc. cit.
- [31] In *Mithridates*, J. M. Gesner cites onomatopoeias of course, but only as exceptions to a rule (2nd edn., Tiguri, 1610, pp. 3–4).
- [32] Except with regard to languages, since the alphabet is the raw material of language. Cf. Chapter II of Gesner's *Mithridates*. The first alphabetical encyclopaedia is L. Moréri's *Grand Dictionnaire historique* of 1674.
- [33] La Croix du Maine, *Les cents Buffets pour dresser une bibliothèque parfaite* (1583).
- [34] Blaise de Vigenère, *Traité des chiffres* (Paris, 1537, pp. 1 and 2); C. Duret, *Trésor de l'histoire des langues*, pp. 19 and 20.
- [35] Montaigne, *Essais* (1580–8, livre III, chap. XIII).