Modernist Curiosities:
Desire, Knowledge and Literature in
Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Elias Canetti’s *
*Die Blendung* and Jorge Luis Borges’s “El Aleph”

by

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More than ever, in modernity, “knowledge” has become the object of an intense desire. The tensions underwriting this modern desire for knowledge are inscribed in the very term, *curiosity*, which is at the centre of this dissertation. A venerable motif, curiosity anchors the specifically modern desire to know within a longstanding philosophical, theological and literary tradition. By the 19th century, “curiosity” is certainly an anachronistic paradigm. Yet, inscribed in curiosity, there are two conflicting dialectics which can be found at the heart of modernity’s unquenchable thirst for knowledge: one the one hand, the dialectic between curiosity as a disenchancing desire to see through into the innermost secrets of things, and curiosity as a “thing”, the product of a fetishist desire arrested on the glittering surface of things. On the other hand, curiosity is beset by the dialectic between the desire for a “totalizing”, meaningful vision and the compulsive drive of an increasingly specialized, meaningless pursuit of knowledge.

This dissertation examines a series of Modernist narratives which expose this double dialectic. The protagonists of Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Elias Canetti’s *Die Blendung* and Jorge Luis Borges’ *El Aleph* are all caricatural, anachronistic, *curieux* ultimately
seeking an “absolute knowledge” that cannot be embodied. The moment it seems to have been attained, it is reified, “objectified” into a fetish, a “curiosity”. Yet, these narratives are not only about curiosity; they are in fact true vortexes of curiosity: that of the protagonists of the narratives as well as that of the authors and the readers themselves. As a result, these narratives also speak to the paradoxical location of literature within culture: literature appears simultaneously as the privileged site of all – ultimately phantasic – totalizing, meaningful visions of the world, as well as a marginal locus, a monstrous cultural residue.
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Introduction

Back in 1980, in an anonymous interview, “Le philosophe masqué”, which Michel Foucault gave to _Le Monde_, the philosopher evoked the “immense curiosité”, the “avidité à savoir” (927) (“thirst of knowledge; 328), of our present era and the need to “multiplier les canaux, les passerelles, les moyens d’information, les réseaux de télévision et de radio, les journaux” (927) (“multiply the channels, the bridges, the means of information, the radio and television networks, the newspapers”; 328). Thirty years later, modern information technologies seem indeed to have heralded a new age of curiosity. And, once more the question seems to be whether this curiosity is a laudable desire to know at the service of the unfettered pursuit of knowledge which Foucault advocates; or, whether it is a superficial and consumerist curiosity kept in a state of constant arousal by our _googles_ and _wikipedias_. We seem to be confronted by an exacerbated form of the age-old debate surrounding curiosity. Curiosity has always been a controversial desire: Augustine condemned _curiositas_ as a dissipating lust of the eyes for the world that diverted from God and salvation. It was not until the Scientific Revolution that the earth-bound curiosity was finally rehabilitated. Yet, by the Enlightenment, it became clear that the pent-up, greedy, gargantuan curiosity unleashed during the Renaissance threatened in turn to divert and distract from the painstaking and concentrated work of abstraction that modern Science required. As a result, the term “curiosity” increasingly referred to the superficial, idle curiosity of the masses, similar to that same “lust of the eyes” once condemned by Augustine; this base, “vulgar” curiosity had to be disciplined into a “noble” curiosity, a desire to know which, in turn, was to lead to the self-possessed and free subject of the Enlightenment. This taming of curiosity is certainly central to the Enlightenment’s core master narrative. As this
narrative has come increasingly into disrepute in modernity, the opposition between a vulgar, alienating curiosity and a noble, emancipating curiosity has become more and more problematic.

In his essay “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?”, Foucault regards Kant’s rallying call, Aude sapere! (“dare to know!”) as quintessential of the Enlightenment. This active and emancipating will to know is very different from a passive, superficial curiosity. Foucault sees here a turning point announcing modernity, or what he calls the “attitude of modernity”. For him, “le fil qui peut nous rattacher … à l’Aufklärung n’est pas la fidelité à des éléments de doctrine, mais plutôt la réactivation permanente d’une attitude; c’est-à-dire un ethos philosophique qu’on pourrait caractériser comme critique permanente de notre être historique.” – “the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical being”). Foucault regards Baudelaire as characteristic of this new ethos; in particular, in the way the poet opposes the flâneur’s passive curiosity to the dandy’s asceticism, who by means of a strict self-discipline (“plus despotique que les plus terribles religions” (74) (“more despotic than the most terrible religions”) turns himself into an “oeuvre d’art” (74). It is interesting to read the defense of this ascetic ethos in a philosopher normally associated with a denunciation of disciplinary power dynamics. There is no contradiction: Foucault sees precisely in this ethos a way to escape what he calls the “‘chantage’ à l’Aufklärung” (76) (“‘blackmail’ of the Enlightenment”) or the false alternative between being “for” or “against” the Enlightenment. Yet, the fate of this ethos in modernity is uncertain, torn apart as it is by the concurrent pressures of, on the one hand, what appears increasingly as a blind, disciplinary drive for knowledge, and, on the other hand, a consumerist, fetishist curiosity.
This dissertation will be looking at a series of Modernist narratives – Flaubert’s last novel *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, Canetti’s only novel, *Die Blendung*, and Borges’s collection of short stories, *Ficciones* – that precisely subvert the grand modern narrative according to which a childish, passive “lowly” curiosity is to mature and to be disciplined into an active, emancipating intellectual curiosity. In these narratives, these two antagonistic curiosities are brought to their paroxysm, to the point in which they end up veering into each other. The fate of curiosity in Modernity can be compared to that of a germane paradigm, “attention”. In his seminal study on attention, *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary argues that “attention” is both the achievement of a self-possessed free subjectivity and, at the same time, a depersonalizing imperative “within the disciplinary organization of labor, education and mass consumption” (2). The same could be said of the “noble” intellectual curiosity which promised to emancipate man from his “self-imposed immaturity” (Kant) but which has been disciplined in Modernity to such an extent that it has become the very blind and compulsive drive behind the autonomous, demonic and somehow inhuman industriousness of Science. Interestingly, for Crary, “inattention” is similarly ambivalent: a manifestation of the passive and automatic behaviour imposed by that same disciplinary organisation of labor; at the same time, “a domain of resistance internal to any system of routinization and coercion” (77). Similarly, the old superficial *curiositas* appears now as an increasingly dissipating and consumerist *Neugier*, or desire of novelty. Yet, this is the same curiosity that Foucault extols in “Le philosophe masqué”:

La curiosité est un vice qui a été stigmatisé tour à tour par le christianisme, par la philosophie et même par une certaine conception de la science. Curiosité, futilité. Le mot pourtant me plaît; il me suggère tout autre chose : il évoque le ‘soin’; il évoque le soin qu’on prend de ce qui existe et pourrait exister; un sens aiguïsé du réel mais qui s’immobilise jamais devant lui; une promptitude à trouver étrange et singulier ce qui nous entoure; un certain acharnement à nous défaire de nos familiarités et à regarder autrement
les mêmes choses; une ardeur à saisir ce qui se passe et ce qui passe; une désinvolture à l’égard des hiérarchies traditionnelles entre l’important et l’essentiel.

Je rêve d’un âge nouveau de la curiosité. On en a les moyens techniques; le désir est là; les choses à savoir sont infinies; les gens qui peuvent s’employer à ce travail existent. De quoi souffre-t-on? Du trop peu : de canaux étroits, étriqués, quasi monopolistiques, insuffisants. Il n’y a pas à adopter une attitude protectionniste, pour empêcher la “mauvaise” information d’envahir et d’étouffer la “bonne”. Il faut plutôt multiplier les chemins et les possibilités d’allées et venues. (“Masqué” 927-8)

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes ‘concern’; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent ‘bad’ information from invading and suffocating the ‘good’. Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings. (328)

Curiosity is not only a fetishist Neugier; it is actually capable of breaking the automatisms of a too well oiled machine of Science, opening up the possibility of new re-articulations and re-configurations of the world.

In his Introduction to The Plague of Fantasies, Slavoj Žižek identifies as one of the fundamental antagonisms of our time “the antagonism between the abstraction which
increasingly determines our lives … and the deluge of pseudo-concrete images” (1). The interest of curiosity as a paradigm is that it brings together two apparently unrelated and even antagonistic phenomena of modernity: an active, ravenous epistemophilia unconsciously haunted by the phantasm of an “absolute knowledge” and the passive surrendering to a fascinating proliferation of fetishized visions and reified images of a radically fragmented world. As a paradigm, “curiosity” inscribes this problematic within a long literary tradition thus enabling an exploration of the ambiguous place of literature within the increasingly fragmented cultural field of modernity. Once a major philosophical and literary motif, curiosity appears by the time of Flaubert as a somewhat outdated motif. Reputedly curious men themselves, Flaubert, Canetti and Borges certainly looked back with nostalgia to the mythical figure of the Renaissance polymath and to a time when the pursuit of knowledge and the quest for truth and meaning seemed to be compatible. As these two became increasingly at odds, it was the aesthetic, and literature by extension, that appeared to the Romantics as the site of a unifying and totalizing vision, capable to counter the much decried modern state of fragmentation ushered in by the division of labour and scientific overspecialization. Tempted as they may be by this Romantic aesthetic ambition, our three modernist writers stage at the same time its grotesque implosion: Bouvard and Pécuchet’s impossible encyclopaedia, Peter Kien’s mental Library, and Borges’ Aleph, ultimate phantasm of modernity’s rabid epistemophilia, prove untenable and end up collapsing, imploding into an inevitably centrifugal and fragmented vision of the world. Flaubert’s last novel not only exposes the compulsive drive for knowledge behind the two protagonists’ encyclopaedic journey, but also the way their parallel quest for meaning and truth can only be arrested in a necessarily arbitrary and reified vision on which a consumerist Neugier will inevitably prey. In other words, modern art certainly cannot offer a final totalizing vision, for in its tireless desire for novelty it is subjected to a similar force as the one driving forth scientific progress.
Thus, there seems to be in modernity, a parallel proliferation of the symbolic and the imaginary orders. Interestingly, if curiosity had always been associated with a “lust of the eyes” for the changing world of appearances, curiosity has also been linked to an empty prattle, inconsequential language deprived of any grip over reality or the world. These two sides of curiosity are shown to be concomitant in Foucault’s essay “La Bibliothèque fantastique”: out of the unstoppable proliferation of words in the Library emerges the spectacle of a fascinating phantasmagoria; this passage about *La Tentation de saint Antoine* is certainly also true in the case of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*:

C’est une œuvre qui se constitue d’entrée de jeu dans l’espace du savoir : elle existe dans un certain rapport fondamental aux livres … La Tentation, elle, se rapporte sur le mode sérieux à l’immense domaine de l’imprimé ; elle prend place dans l’institution reconnue de l’écriture. … Après le *Le Livre* de Mallarmé deviendra possible, puis Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Pound, Borges. La bibliothèque est en feu. (10)

As a work, its form relies on its location within the domain of knowledge: it exists by virtue of its essential relationship to books … The Temptation … is linked in a completely serious manner to the vast world of print and develops within the recognizable institution of writing. … following Flaubert, Mallarmé was able to write *Le Livre* and modern literature is activated – Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Pound, Borges. The library is on fire. (48)

Canetti’s *Die Blendung* could as well be easily interpolated in this orthodox narrative of modernism leading to post-modernism. However, Foucault fails to provide an explanation for this sudden emergence of the “fantasy of the Library”. It seems that by the time of Flaubert, literature has abandoned any epistemological ambitions, or at least it has abandoned the ambition of crowning an indefatigable pursuit of knowledge. Instead, literature thrives in the gap that opens up at the heart of this ever expanding and all-reaching project of *mathesis* and
symbolization of the world; this leftover space is going to be filled not with a static, totalizing, final vision but by an uncontrollable parasitic proliferation of the imaginary. Thus, although in Bouvard et Pécuchet literature is still pregnant with the Romantic aspiration to be the final recapitulation of an increasingly fragmented modernity, there is the creeping suspicion that literature is becoming merely an inconsequential “curiosity”, a mere pastime and distraction from the serious business of the pursuit of knowledge.

It is very tempting to read the three case studies that make up this dissertation as enacting the orthodox narrative of literary modernism leading to post-modernism, according to which, literature can only bear witness to the centrifugal, fragmenting forces of modernity. Conversely, and not surprisingly, it is by reading these stories of impotence, withdrawal and isolation as a celebration of literature’s new conquered autonomy that Flaubert, Canetti and Borges are considered proto-post-modernists. Rather than taking part in what ultimately remains a nominalist debate, or attempting a re-writing of the history of modernism – which is certainly no longer necessary – this dissertation purports to reinstate the fundamental ambivalence of Flaubert, Canetti and Borges’ modernism, very much engaged in the ongoing project of modernity, exposing its fundamental underlying paradoxes and aporias rather than resolving or dissolving them. On the one hand, as fundamentally modernist, Bouvard et Pécuchet, Die Blendung and Borges’s “El Aleph” appear as being still largely imbued with the dominant analytico-referential models of Western rationality; on the other hand, as proto-post-modernists works, they seem to bear witness to – and even celebrate – the collapse of Enlightenment’s totalizing “systems” and master narratives. Renouncing any epistemological ambitions as suspect and seeing this epistemological renunciation as a form of resistance to the hegemonic discourses, these works would then be a celebration of a dissipating, dispersing, flickering curiosity. These
two readings are not exclusive, for these farcical satires of knowledge are painfully serious at the same time.

This dialectic at work in a curiosity caught in a play of mirrors is heightened by the fact that, in these narratives – as in this dissertation –, curiosity becomes an object for itself. This curiosity for curiosity can be regarded both as a supreme form of curiosity, but also as a supremely futile curiosity. Yet, ultimately, as Borges’s Aleph bears out, this play of mirrors, this dialectic between a centrifugal Neugier and a centripetal Wissbegier – which is also paradoxically a dialectic between a fetishist Neugier and a restless Wissbegier – cannot be our last interpretative horizon. For, curiosity presupposes an original (point of) fixation. In fact, our modern tales of curiosity should be read as hypertrophied outgrowths of what Rodolphe Gasché sees as the “primal scene” of theory: the anecdote told by Socrates in Plato’s Theaetetus about Thales, the philosopher-astronomer, who falls into a well while he was looking at the stars above, and provokes the laughter of an onlooker, a Thracian maid. As Gasché explains, in this anecdote, philosophy’s theoretical gaze is trying to see itself from outside. In its libidinal dimension, the anecdote is above all the “primal scene” of curiosity. Curiosity looking into its own repressed – but constitutive – origin; curiosity’s voyeuristic desire to see, to be a disembodied, panoptic gaze from nowhere, finds its counterpart in the desire to be seen – scopophilia and exhibitionism being, according to Freud1, two sides of the same libidinal coin. Flaubert, Canetti and Borges stage the curious spectacle of curiosity. And they do this from an ambivalent position: even more than in the case of Socrates’ anecdote, it is not very clear whether we should join the maid’s laughter at the ridiculous spectacle of an intellectual caught in his serious epistemological games, or whether we should appreciate his tribulations as he

\footnote{1 See “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”, \textit{On Metapsychology} (126).}
struggles to make sense of the world. In the end, what these narratives do is to expose the disembodied, contemplative “eye” of curiosity – panoptic God-like eye or mere keyhole prying eye – in its obscene and repressed corpo-reality.

The category of the aesthetic emerged as the project to bridge the human, concrete and material world of particulars and the abstract and formalized “world” of universals. As it turned out, the aesthetic not only increasingly bore witness to the brutal encroaching of the latter over the former, but ended up enshrining it. Yet, at the same time, the aesthetic appears also in modernist works such as Bouvard et Pécuchet, Die Blendung and El Aleph as the site of resistance against this all-pervasive encroaching. These works certainly expose the inability of epistemological categories to account for a multi-faceted and changing reality – an impotence which has too often been exalted and celebrated as language’s poetic power to re-create the world. However, unable to be “said” or known in its positivity, “reality”, rather than simply vanishing under the smothering, hermetic symbolic blanket thrown over it, comes back with a vengeance and makes itself felt, as a sort of “brute facticity” (77), to use Terry Eagleton’s expression in The Ideology of the Aesthetic. It is not only that our gallery of curieux keep, like Thales, stumbling, bumping and falling into a down-to-earth, commonsensical “reality”. Rather, instead of “reality”, one should speak here of that “impossibility”, which Lacan, in Le quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, defines as the “Real” (188). The notion is relevant here for two reasons: first of all, because it is both on the side of the (curious) subject and of the (curious) object; “absolute knowledge” cannot be embodied: Peter Kien in Die Blendung and the Aleph in “El Aleph” represent the two sides, subjective and objective, of this impossibility. Because a disembodied absolute knowledge cannot be embodied, its materializations are always farcically lowly, residual – a “mortified” flesh in the case of Kien, and pure but abstract materiality in the case of the Aleph. For, and this is the second reason for our interest in the
Lacanian Real, the Real is conceived of as the object-cause of desire. Or, as Žižek puts it, “simultaneously presupposed and posed by the symbolic” (Sublime 169); it both precedes symbolization and is its by-product, its residue. It is out of this inassimilable left-over of a compulsive, universal project of symbolization that these narratives of an impossible curiosity – and literature – spin out as a cultural left-over, as true “curiosities.”

*Bouvard et Pécuchet*

The genre of the Bildungsroman once exemplified the Romantic dream to gather the centrifugal – fragmenting and dispersing – forces of Modernity into a unifying narrative of education, a *Bildung* – formation – of a mature individual. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, instead of a Bildungsroman, instead of the story of a maturing – a taming and disciplining – of a base curiosity into a lofty intellectual curiosity, both curiosities coexist. The novel is thus susceptible of two very different readings: on the one hand, Bouvard and Pecuchet’s encyclopaedic journey is rigidly structured as true ascension of the ladder of knowledge, as the protagonists tackle one science after the other; on the other hand, the novel recounts the aimless wandering of the two protagonists at the mercy of what Benjamin dubbed “das träge Lüftchen der Neugier” (*Passagen-Werk* 571) (“the idle wind of curiosity”; 457): the novel then appears as a random succession of anecdotes. Far from undermining each other, these two concomitant narratives within *Bouvard* reinforce each other. The encyclopaedia, both in its doing and its undoing, encapsulates the mixture of unbounded desire and profound anxiety elicited by knowledge. In the Preface to his *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, Pierre Larousse observes: “Jamais la soif d’apprendre, de savoir, de juger, ne s’était emparée plus impérieusement des esprits; jamais la pensée, surexcitée sans cesse par de nouvelles découvertes, n’avait abordé un ensemble plus étendu de questions et de problèmes hardis” (qtd. in Mollier 336) (“never had the thirst to learn,
to know, to judge taken hold of the minds so imperiously; never had the mind, overexcited by the new discoveries, tackled a wider array of difficult questions and problems”) (my translation). Larousse’s encyclopaedia exemplifies, according to Jean-Yves Mollier, a typically decimononic hubristic aspiration to erect a “[b]ibliothèque contenant toutes les bibliothèques du monde, Babel surélevée jusqu’à la voûte céleste” (336) (“library containing all of the world’s libraries, Babel rising towards the skies”) (my translation). This phantasmic towering Library represents the unattainable crystallization of a burning desire to know finally arresting the unstoppable march forward of Science, which seems to take place at the expense of an all too human need for closure and meaning. It is precisely this dream of a monumental and definitive “tower of knowledge” that Flaubert derides in his “encyclopédie en farce”, Bouvard et Pécuchet is certainly monumental, yet overblown and ultimately hollow: a monument erected in honour of the stupidity of a century. In fact, Flaubert’s encyclopaedia hardly raises above the ground-level of bourgeois platitudes and “received ideas”. An entire phallic ideal of knowledge is being deflated here: the two Flaubertian heroes painfully ascend the ladder of knowledge, but to no avail; for, in the end, the ladder is flattened and reduced to a circular, compulsive and ultimately sterile endeavour.

**Die Blendung**

In Die Blendung, the dialectic of blindness and insight is brought to its paroxysm: the only insight afforded by Peter Kien’s compulsive and blind drive for knowledge takes the form of the phantasmic hallucinations to which he seems to be subjected. The supposedly emancipating Wissbegier of Peter Kien, emaciated “man of learning”, turns out to be a demonic and alienating drive. Instead of conjuring a meaningful vision of Truth, Die Blendung depicts the uncontrollable, parasitic proliferation of phantasms in Peter Kien’s grey and hermetic world. In a
true descent into the Platonic cave, Peter Kien is expelled from his library on the upper floor: as a result, the skylight above his walled-off library is replaced in the end by the peeping-hole in the janitors’ sordid basement apartment. The motif of the burning library remains profoundly ambivalent: for, if the fire is sparked by a dry, disciplinary, disembodied and ultimately tyrannical desire to know; we, readers of Canetti, run the risk of complacently joining the crowd of curieux assembled around the library in flames, mesmerized by the fascinating spectacle of a whole culture in flames. Intellectual curiosity and superficial curiosity, brought to their complementary alienating paroxysms, appear here as the inescapable alternative of a self-destructing, nightmarish modernity.

**El Aleph**

Finally, Borges’ fictional *Aleph* – “the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist” (127) – represents the contradictory and impossible locus reuniting our two curiosities: theoretical curiosity, prone to regard itself as a panoptic gaze that looks down onto the world, is now impossible to distinguish from the idle curiosity of that peeping gaze which looks at the world from a small opening in the basement’s staircase. Freud had already traced back intellectual curiosity (Wissbegier) to an infantile sexual curiosity (Neugier). Freud’s own curiosity about curiosity was thus able to reveal curiosity’s constituting blind spot, its own repressed origin. According to Freud, it is by evoking this obscene primal scene of curiosity that a supremely sublimated and disinterested Wissbegier is able to surmount its constitutive repression, become productive and capable of actually begetting “knowledge”. With similar candour, we could say that Flaubert, Canetti and Borges, all consumed by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge which they are able to channel into a literary achievement, succeed where the protagonists of their fictions fail, consumed as they are by an
ultimately sterile and self-destructive curiosity. Yet, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* remains an unfinished work, a fragmented and chaotic encyclopaedia; *Die Blendung* seems to dissolve in the flames of its ending; and *El Aleph* is a short fiction, pendant to the ridiculous, unfinished encyclopaedic poem that Daneri planned to write. Flaubert, Canetti and Borges’ curiosity is only capable of begetting monstrous “curiosities”.
Chapter 1

Epistemophilia, Wissbegier, Neugier and other Curiosities

In a letter to Louise Colet in 1854, Gustave Flaubert recounts his research, reading a treatise to learn about “la théorie des pieds bots” (“the theory of clubfeet”; 174), in order to write a famous passage in Madame Bovary. He concludes the letter by a nostalgic paean to the past:

Il faudrait tout connaître pour écrire. Tous tant que nous sommes, écrivassiers, nous avons une ignorance monstrueuse, et pourtant comme tout cela fournirait des idées, des comparaisons ! La moelle nous manque généralement ! Les livres d'où ont découlé les littératures entières, comme Homère, Rabelais, sont des encyclopédies de leur époque. Ils savaient tout, ces bonnes gens-là ; et nous, nous ne savons rien. (Lettre à Louise Collet du 7 avril 1854)

One ought to know everything, to write! All of us scribblers are monstrously ignorant. If only we weren’t so lacking in stamina, what a rich field of ideas and similes we could tap! Books that have been the source of entire literatures, like Homer or Rabelais, contain the sum of all knowledge of their times. They knew everything, those fellows, and we know nothing. (Letters 174)

By the mid-nineteenth century, Flaubert’s lamentation is certainly a literary commonplace; Renaissance writers looked back for that ideal of the “total” poet in Antiquity, and Classical writers already envied the blind poet Homer in whom poetry and “science” were still reunited. Yet, this complaint becomes a true leitmotif during the nineteenth century. In Schiller, Hegel, and Marx, Philip J. Kain speaks of a pervasive “myth of Ancient Greece”, a nostalgia for a time before the split of the human faculties and the division of labour\(^2\). This mythical state of unity

\(^2\) In Frederick’s Schiller’s Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (Letters of the Aesthetical Education of Man), Letter VI, we read:
can be considered as a true phantasm for a “Kantian” modernity marked by the separation of truth, morality and beauty. Under the pen of Flaubert this nostalgia betrays the sense of loss and alienation underlying the autonomy of art and literature in modernity. In *The Fate of Art*, J. M. Bernstein defines “aesthetical alienation” precisely as “the experience of art as having lost or been deprived of its power to speak the truth” (4); modernity, as a result, “is the site of beauty bereaved – bereaved of truth” (4). But, because of this “aesthetical alienation”, literature can “register (in a speaking silence) a second-order truth about first-order truth” thus becoming “the critical self-reflection of truth-only cognition and its conscience” (5).

This dissertation will examine a few modernist narratives whose central motif, and motivating force, is a grotesquely exacerbated desire for truth and knowledge; the “second-order truth” to which these narratives seem to point might in fact be the truth of that burning desire itself. These three particular tales of curiosity were selected because they hold a cautionary mirror in which the epistemological ambitions of the authors – as well as of the readers and critics – are reflected. Although the three writers considered span literary modernism – Flaubert can be considered a proto-modernist, Elias Canetti and Jorge Luis Borges are modernists who already announce post-modernism –, it is important to emphasize that this dissertation does not
address primarily the problem of demarcation between modernism and post-modernism. I have decided to focus on modernism out of the conviction that the tensions between an autonomous literary field and an equally autonomous pursuit of knowledge in modernity, as well as the resulting anxiety, make themselves more vividly felt in modernism than in post-modernism, where they are often evacuated. Yet, by the end, I have come to the realization that these works which are seen as exponents, at once, of a quintessential modernism and of an avant la lettre post-modernism encapsulate the two sides of a paradoxical and aporetic modernity.

The tensions underwriting this modern desire to know are inscribed in the very term, curiosity, which is at the centre of this project. A venerable motif, curiosity anchors the specifically modern desire to know within a longstanding philosophical, theological and literary tradition. Indeed, curiosity refers to a time before the separation of truth, morality and beauty. A time which, as Eagleton observes, is not necessarily to be regarded with nostalgia, for the desire to know was then considered mostly as a monstrous sin, a hubristic aspiration to a knowledge beyond the human station\(^3\). With the progressive separation and autonomy of the different spheres of activity, curiosity was freed from all cramping authorities and taboos which had kept it under check for so long. Emancipated from all of its constraints, curiosity became the very autonomous and impersonal “force” or dynamical principle behind the modern pursuit of knowledge. By the 19\(^{th}\) century, “curiosity” is certainly an anachronistic paradigm which only reappears as a residue, in a degraded and caricatural form, in the aesthetic domain, the space of the body and desire in modernity. Indeed, Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Elias Canetti’s *Die Blendung* and Jorge Luis Borges’ *El Aleph* are all caricatural narratives of an

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\(^3\) See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (367).
outdated, belated curiosity, stories of middle-aged single men embarked in solitary quests for knowledge.

This return of curiosity can be regarded as a mere “curiosity”, a remnant of a bygone era when the pursuit of knowledge was still a theological or moral question, or worse, as a form of nostalgia for a sacred sphere rightfully beyond human inquisitiveness. Yet, under their anachronistic and even obscurantist trappings, these narratives of curiosity can also be seen as an attempt to re-inscribe an increasingly autonomous pursuit of knowledge within an all-to-human life-quest for meaning and truth; and, by the same token, as a reflection on the relation between literature, knowledge and life in modernity. Considered through the prism of an outdated motif like curiosity, these very modern preoccupations are defamiliarized and inserted into a new thematic constellation which might reveal hitherto neglected aspects and connections.

Indeed, curiosity is a motif rich in resonances and associations. Inscribed in it, there are a series of fruitful ambivalences and contradictions which will guide our exploration. A first ambivalence is that curiosity refers simultaneously to an ambitious, all-reaching desire to know and to an “inquisitiveness in reference to trifles or matters which do not concern one” (Oxford Dictionary). Curiosity is both a centripetal force by which we draw always closer to truth in a sort of gravitational, spiral-like movement, but also a centrifugal pull away from truth. For Nicole Jacques-Chapin, curiosity has always been above all an “invitation au voyage” (13) (“invitation to travel”) (my translation); however, like Ulysses, who went from incarnating that quintessential Greek resourcefulness or métis to be the prototype of a “bad” curiositas, the curieux constantly runs the risk of going astray in their epistemological journey, and end up lost in a labyrinth of particulars, condemned to error and wandering (errance in French), and even madness. The same force that tries to unify and agglutinate the world into one totalising vision
can easily implode into its opposite, a dissolving and dispersing force. This very contradiction inherent in curiosity can in fact be found in modernity at the heart of the autonomous aesthetic sphere: art is, on the one hand, “only art, mere art, a matter of taste” (Bernstein 3), a dissipating distraction, divorced from truth and morality; and, on the other hand, art aspires to speak a “higher” truth, a truth from which rational knowledge would be alienated. This ambiguity which supports the distinction between “high” and “low” modernisms is grounded in the fundamental ambivalence of an autonomous literary field; autonomy is here understood as both alienating – literature reduced to the role of supplement of culture – as well as liberating, for it sits on a privileged space, a recapitulatory site, capable of subsuming the spheres of truth and morality. Brought to their paroxysm in our narratives, these two modernisms appear as two equally grotesque and inseparable poles: the “higher” truth of these cumbersome, serious works about a ravenous curiosity is precisely the grotesque laughter of the “belly”, the mortified bodily support of that lofty, disembodied “love” for knowledge which seeks to ignore, to deny its own libidinal origins.

Curiosity is ambivalent on yet another level: it refers at once to a personal attribute and to the quality of a thing; in other words, it applies both to the knowing subject and to the object of knowledge. A curiosity is something strange, rare, monstrous, awe-inspiring, an object which paradoxically both elicits and arrests curiosity. Curiosity begets curiosities. In fact, *cabinet of curiosités* and *Wunderkammern* were, at the outset of modern science, the mark of a new economy of knowledge – before being replaced by the products of techno-science, unequivocal markers of the economy of production and consumption underlying the modern pursuit of knowledge. In *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Laura Mulvey sets up an opposition between curiosity, understood as desire to know, and fetishism – both in its Freudian and Marxist senses as “psychological and social structure that disavow[s] knowledge in favour of belief” (xi). Yet,
knowledge and its disavowal are already inscribed in *curiosity*. Curiosity is both a disenchanting desire to see through into the innermost secrets of things but it is also a desire not to pierce the traumatic secret, a fetishist gaze fixated on the glittering – full of promise – surface of things.

This dialectic can also be found, inverted, at the narratological level in Peter Brooks’s conception of the narrative as a libidinal detour, a metonymical chain of desire, whose final fixation is always postponed; by reaching its end, the narrative crystallizes into a meaningful form. It is this tension between two incompatible readings in which I am interested: on the one hand, these narratives resist their fixation into a necessarily reified, fetishized form and attempt to stay true to a restless drive; on the other hand, these are narratives which tell the cautionary and proverbial – meaningful – narrative of that same blind and compulsive, ultimately meaningless, drive. Mark of an aporetic modernity, an autonomous, demonic curiosity might be inimical to life and its urgencies, but life cannot be fully lived without that same curiosity.

1 **Curiositas**

In order to gain a better understanding of our gallery of modern *curieux*, it is essential to look more closely at certain fundamental milestones in the rich and eventful history of our central motif, a tradition in which the works under study are deeply rooted. As we will see, rather than a mere exercise in the archaeology of ideas, this short history of curiosity will raise relevant epistemological questions. For, curiosity not only evokes a long-gone time when mythical and religious restrictions and prohibitions of all sorts were imposed on what was regarded as a necessarily hubristic desire to know. Curiosity was also a central concept in all the discussions involving knowledge and its relations with desire, vision (the gaze) and language, all of them questions that have remained central in modernity. In his introduction to *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, David Michael Levin remarks how the hegemony of the visual paradigm in
the conceptions of reality, knowledge and truth has been challenged in modernity. He quotes Arendt’s observation that “[s]ince Bergson, the use of the sight metaphor in philosophy has kept dwindling, not unsurprisingly, as emphasis and interest have shifted entirely from contemplation to speech, from nous to logos” (qtd 2). Yet, as Hans Blumenberg remarks in the first contribution to Levin’s volume, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth. At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation⁴”, the Church Fathers had already tried to “harmonize Greek *theoria* (progressively identified to *status gloriae*) and the Word, and the importance of hearing the Word” (46). Developed by the same Fathers, the concept of *curiositas* had always visual and aural components.

The hegemony of vision in Western epistemology has come into disrepute in modernity. For instance, Derrida considers that “l’histoire de notre philosophie est une photologie” (45) (“the entire history of our philosophy is a photology”; 31). The importance in philosophy of the metaphor of vision can be traced back to the Greek contemplative ideal of knowledge, *theoria*. This intimate link between the desire to see and the desire to know which Aristotle regards as natural will be seen already by Augustine with suspicion. Augustine identifies *curiositas* with a *concupisciencia oculorum* or “lust of the eyes”, which will constitute together with pride and carnality a sinful triad of temptations diverting from God⁵. To this dispersing and dissipating, earthbound *curiositas*, Augustine opposes the spiritual contemplation of God. In the shift from

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⁴ Blumenberg’s article was originally published as “Licht als Metapher der Wahrheit: Im Vorfeld der philosophischen Begriffsbildung” in *Studium General* 10, no. 7, 1957.

⁵ In this sense, Pascal mentions in the *Pensée* 458 *libido sentiendi, libido scienti, libido dominandi*: “Malheurese la terre de malédiction que ces trios fleuves de feu embrasent plutôt qu’ils n’arrosent”. (“Wretched is the cursed land which these three rivers of fire enflame rather than water!”; 128).
Greek *theoria* to Christian *contemplation*, seeing remains a metaphor for knowing, but now a paradoxical metaphor: the light visible to the naked eye is opposed to the spiritual “true Light [which] is the Light that Tobias saw […] though his eyes were blind” (Blumenberg, *Light* 240).

As a result, the sense of wonder which, according to Aristotle, was what awakened a praiseworthy desire to know, is regarded by Augustine as dangerous: in the contemplation of a wondrous Creation, one can get caught in the labyrinth of particulars, mindlessly gaping at a world which distracts the soul from God. Augustine extends his condemnation of a fetishist curiosity fixated on “curiosities” to the curiosity at the heart of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake:

> It is to satisfy this unhealthy curiosity that freaks and prodigies are put on show in the theatre, and for the same reason men are led to investigate the secrets of nature, which are irrelevant to our lives, although such knowledge is of no value to them and they wish to gain it merely for the sake of knowing. (242)

Augustine is alluding here to the etymological root of curiosity as superfluous, idle or aimless concern or care – *cura*.

In the contemplation of God, seeing is turned inward, just like in Plato’s myth of the cave, one had to turn around to leave the cave and step into the outer Light. This ascetic turning away from the world is achieved through a true self-discipline. Interestingly, all the emphasis on an ascetic self-discipline to extricate the soul from the materiality of the world, the senses and the body goes hand in hand with a centrifugal, dispersing *curiositas*. In the *Confessions*, there is

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6 Following Aristotle, Augustine claims that “for although, correctly speaking, to see is the proper function of the eyes, we use the word of the other senses too, when we employ them to acquire knowledge.” (Confessions 241)
an interesting passage very representative of Augustine’s constant efforts to turn away from a
tempting, centrifugal *curiositas*:

I no longer go to watch a dog chasing a hare at the game in the circus. But I should
happen to see the same thing in the country as I pass by, the chase might easily hold my
attention and distract me from whatever serious thought occupied my mind. It might not
actually compel me to turn my horse from the path, but such would be the inclination of
my heart; and unless you make me realize my weakness and quickly reminded me, either
to turn my eyes from the sight and raise my thoughts to you in contemplation, or to
despise it utterly and continue on my way, I should simply stop and gloat. What excuse
can I make for myself when often, as I sit at home, I cannot turn my eyes from the sight
of a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling them as they fly into her web? Does it
make any difference that these are only small animals? It is true that the sight of them
inspires me to praise you for the wonders your creation, but I am not intent upon your
praises when I first begin to watch. It is one thing to rise quickly from a fall than not to
fall at all. (243)

What is particularly modern in this passage is how Augustine’s efforts towards self-possession
on the spiritual level are concomitant with the explosion of the material world into a myriad of
disttracting “curiosities”.

Medieval monasticism will insist on another aspect of a distracting and dispersing
curiosity, which we could call “textual curiositas”. In *The Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers
looks at John Cassian who defined *curiositas* as “mental fornication”, an “aimless, fruitless,
shifting expenditure of energy” (82) out of laziness and sloth:

[…] the spirit rolls along from psalm to psalm, leaps from the gospel to St. Paul, from
Paul to the prophets, from there it is carried off to holy stories. Ever on the move, forever
wandering, it is tossed along through all the body of Scripture, unable to settle on
anything, unable to reject anything or hold on to anything, powerless to arrive at any full
and judicious study, a dilettante and a nibbler on spiritual interpretation rather than being its creator and possessor. (qtd. in Carruthers 83)

An opposition is set between a wandering “bad” curiosity and a self-possessed “good” curiosity. Monastic discipline sought to dull sense perception so that nothing would distract the meditative soul, which could then “concentrate[…] in the inner ‘seeing’” (Carruthers 84). The monastery’s function was precisely to help the soul by providing a quiet and austere claustrum – enclosure – from the clatter of the world, providing the soul with a second skin made of stone that make it easier for the soul to concentrate in its inner Music and Light to build an inner “Temple of God” (275). Here too it is important to stress that the prevention against curiosity and worldly distractions are anchored in a discourse on self-discipline and control, on walls and enclosures. Conversely, we could consider that it is curiositas itself that becomes a symptom of bodily discipline, of the enforcing of the mind/body dichotomy.

To a certain extent, this is also mirrors the fate of curiosity in modernity. The presence of many of the motifs attached to Augustinian curiositas in the works under study not only points to the ridiculous anachronism of our truly monastic curieux; curiositas is relevant to understand the effects of what Foucault dubs the “disciplinarization of knowledges”⁷ that takes place after the 18th century. This modern “disciplinarization” seeks to turn the body into a docile, impossibly transparent and immaterial, medium through which Knowledge, rather than God, might speak. Flaubert, Canetti and Borges expose the link between this disciplinarization and the centrifugal, fragmenting forces of a distracting and distracted modernity. As portrayals of a dispersing and alienating curiosity, Bouvard et Pécuchet, Die Blendung and El Aleph are therefore symptomatic of a disciplined – disciplining and disciplinary – pursuit of knowledge.

2 The modern disciplining of curiosity

However, modern curiosity differs considerably from Augustinian curiositas. After the Renaissance, all the enclosures and barriers which used to constrain and restrain curiosity fell one after the other, thus bringing to an end what Hans Blumenberg has dubbed “der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde” (“the trial of theoretical curiosity”). Yet, Blumenberg’s essential insight is that the progressive rehabilitation of curiositas during the Renaissance should not be considered as bringing forth a return of the same, as simply a rehabilitation of the ancient theoretical curiosity. After centuries of restrictions, it is a pent-up curiosity which the Renaissance unleashes. In Wonders and the Order of Nature, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park emphasize that early modern curiosity was different from Augustine’s; it had undergone a double transformation: “a shift from the dynamic of lust to that of greed, and ... an alliance with wonder” (306). Indeed, the heyday of Wunderkammern and cabinet de curiosités in the 17th century signalled the advent of this new voracious curiosity which gave an unprecedented impetus to natural history and modern empirical science. Yet, soon after, we find already in Descartes a warning against “the malady of those who are blindly curious, that is to say, who seek out rarities only to wonder at them, and not to understand them” (qtd in Daston and Park 317). Over the next century, wonder was to be treated with increasing suspicion, more as an obstacle than as a spur for curiosity. By the Enlightenment, wonder was identified with an idle gawking, while curiosity did not dwell anymore “on particulars, the stuff of mid-seventeenth-century inquiry, but rather ascended swiftly to universals and generalizations.” (328)

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8 Title of the third part of Blumenberg’s Die Legitimität der Neuzeit (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age).
Although enlightening, Daston and Park’s account fails to see that the dialectic between wonder and curiosity is actually inscribed in curiosity itself. By describing the history of early modern curiosity as an evolution by which a “once-frivolous curiosity took on the virtuous trappings of hard work” (Daston and Park 305), the radical ambivalence of modern curiosity is obscured. For, as the authors themselves observe, we find in the entry for “curiosity” of the 18th century *Encyclopédie* a distinction between the “curiosité pour toutes sortes de choses nouvelles [qui] est l’apanage de l’oisiveté” (Chevalier de Jaucourt; 577) (“curiosity for all kinds of novelties, [which] is the portion of the lazy”) (trans. in Daston and Park) from a “noble curiosité” (“noble curiosity”) that demands “un travail, une application continue” (“constant work and application”) (trans. in Daston and Park 328); in Nicole Jacques-Chaquin’s words, we have here the distinction between a “curiosité papillonnante” and a “curiosité ‘intense’” (23). Curiosity is split between, on the one hand, an emancipating desire to know relentlessly probing into all the secrets of Nature and bringing down all the idols and illusions singled out by Francis Bacon; and, on the other hand, an alienating curiosity arrested and fixated on wonders, rarities and monstrosities, which are consumed in a frenetic consumerist greed. Echoing Augustine’s split between *curiositas* and *contemplatio*, modern curiosity is also split along the mind / body divide: while “noble curiosity” identifies itself increasingly with mechanically logical thought processes, a lowly curiosity is increasingly conceived of as a fetishist, greedy scopic desire. This split also cuts across the social “body”: the “noble curiosity” of the happy few embarked in the pursuit of knowledge is opposed to a base and vulgar curiosity of the masses. And, rather than increasingly referring to the higher “noble curiosity”, as Daston and Park would have it, the very term “curiosity” will increasingly refer to its lowly, fetishist, form. Meanwhile, the increasingly disinterested and disembodied “noble curiosity” had progressively been transferred into the pursuit of knowledge itself to become the very dynamic principle at the heart of science. As a
result, curiosity abruptly ceases to be a fundamental cultural motif by the end of the 18th century: for, the existence of any libidinal component, any “passions of inquiry⁹”, underlying the Enlightenment’s ideal of rational knowledge was bound to be considered with growing suspicion.

The suppression of the dialectic inherent in curiosity is achieved through what we could call a narrative of domestication, maturation or even sublimation of a fetishist, lowly curiosity into a disinterested, disembodied theoretical curiosity. An archetypical version of this narrative can be found in Gaston Bachelard’s *La Formation de l’esprit scientifique*. Bachelard’s avowed aim is to “psychoanalyser l’intérêt, ruiner tout utilitarisme si déguisé qu’il soit” (10) (“psychoanalyse interest, to destroy all utilitarianism, however disguised its form and lofty the status it claims”; 21). The “scientific mind” has to overcome a series of “epistemological obstacles” during its “formation” or development. Among these epistemological obstacles, “naïve curiosity” ranks high: “En donnant une satisfaction immédiate à la curiosité, en multipliant les occasions de la curiosité, loin de favoriser la culture scientifique, on l’entrave. On remplace la connaissance par l’admiration, les idées par les images” (29) (“by giving immediate satisfaction to curiosity and by multiplying the opportunities for curiosity, far from encouraging scientific culture we hinder it. We replace knowledge by wonderment and ideas by images”; 38). If Bachelard regards this lowly, naïve curiosity, as an “epistemological obstacle”, it is because, for him, “[l]’amour de la science doit être un dynamisme psychique autogène” (10) (“the love of science must be an autogenous psychic dynamism”; 21). We have here the fundamental master narrative of the Enlightenment, the “formation”, the *Bildung*, of the subject of the

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⁹ This is the title that Daston & Park give to their chapter on the relations between wonder and curiosity in the early modern period.
Enlightenment, consists in the taming, maturing or “sublimation” of this childish, animalistic “naïve curiosity” into a autonomous and impersonal mechanism, a “dynamisme psychique autogène”. In a way, we find here a similarly paradoxical visual paradigm as we had in Augustine’s “inner contemplation”, this “psychic dynamism” is conceived as blind, “form-less”, yet pointing to a form of “higher seeing”, the invisible laws of Nature. The paradox is that by subjecting itself to the blind, autonomous industry of the modern pursuit of Knowledge, the subject of the Enlightenment achieves his formation, its Bildung, and acquires his own “form” and self-“image”.

Knowledge has undergone a fundamental change of status in Modernity. As Slavoj Žižek points out in Enjoy Your Symptom, “scientific knowledge cannot serve as the symbolic ‘big Other’” (249). And this, for one important reason:

[T]he gap between modern science and the Aristotelian commonsense philosophical ontology is here insurmountable: it emerges already with Galileo, and is brought to the extreme in quantum physics, where we are dealing with the rules/laws that function, although they cannot ever be retranslated into our experience of representable reality. (249)

To use Hans Blumenberg terms, “theoretischen Weltmodellen” (Blumenberg, Legitimität 473) (“theoretical world models”; 405) can no longer be translated into “lebensdienliche Weltbilder” (473) (“world pictures useful for life10”; 405). As a result, we have a proliferation of parasitic

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10 By “Weltmodell” (“world models”), Blumenberg refers to “die von dem jeweiligen Stand der Naturwissenschaften abhängige und die Gesamtheit ihrer Aussagen integrierende Systemvorstellung der Wirklichkeit” (473) (“the systematic representation of reality that is dependent on the state of the natural sciences at a given time and that integrates the totality of their assertions”; 644) and by “Weltbild” (“world pictures”), he means: “denjenigen Inbegriff der Wirklichkeit, in dem und durch den der Mensch sich selbst dieser Wirklichkeit zuordnet, seine Wertungen und Handlungsziele orientiert, seine Möglichkeiten und Bedürfnisse erfaßt und sich in seinen wesentlichen Relationen versteht” (473) (“the summary of reality in which and by whose means man

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“pictures” at the heart of a compulsive and blind drive to knowledge, to which a fetishist curiosity becomes the necessary counterpart.

The narratives studied in this dissertation challenge and undermine the Enlightenment master narrative of education and formation. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a true anti-Bildungsroman recounting the impossible education of two middle-aged autodidacts whose belated naïve curiosity can never be sublimated into a true “love for knowledge”; instead, the dichotomy between a fetishist, consumerist curiosity and a probing curiosity piercing through the fetishes, idols and illusions of the tribe become an inescapable, mutually reinforcing alternative. In *Die Blendung*, we assist at the implosion, grotesque de-formation, of the subject of the Enlightenment as a supposedly emancipating theoretical curiosity collapses into its lowly, centrifugal counterpart. Finally, Borges’ *Aleph* is the impossible imaginary site, both phantasmic and nightmarish, where the two curiosities would meet.

The opposition between the active, self-possessed curiosity of the Subject of the Enlightenment and a passive, alienating curiosity is problematic: on the one hand, it seems that against a dissipating, consumerist curiosity, jumping for one thing to the next, theoretical curiosity might provide an anchor to a self-possessed, centred, knowing subject, the promise of its own (self-)realization. Yet, on the other hand, rather than as the centrifugal pole, *Neugier* appears also as the centripetal one, fixated on a particular object and gravitating around it, while *Wissbegier* appears as a restless, ultimately centrifugal, principle which cannot be embodied and coordinates himself with this reality, orients his evaluations and the end of his actions, grasps his possibilities and needs, and understands himself in his essential relations” (644).
is disinclined to take any form; the subject of Enlightenment is an unfinished – and unachievable – project.

3 From desire to know to epistemic drive

The moment has come to pay a closer look at this industrious “noble curiosity” that propels the modern pursuit of knowledge. Modern “theoretical curiosity” is grounded on a theoretical ideal altogether different from Ancient theoria. Blumenberg points out that with Francis Bacon, the ancient contemplative ideal of theoria becomes the mark of indolence and even sloth; as a result, theory “nicht mehr ruhende und beglückende Anschauung der sich selbst darbietenden Dinge ist – wie es die Antike gesehen hatte –, sondern als Arbeit und Kraftprobe begriffen wird” (Legitimität 449) (“is no longer the reposeful and bliss-conferring contemplation of things that present themselves—as the ancient world had regarded it—but rather it is understood as work and a test of strength; 385). Thus, the other side of a greedy, consumerist curiosity is an industrious theoretical curiosity, constantly producing knowledge – Hobbes notes than curiosity is characterised “by a perseverance of delight in the continuall and indefatigable generation of Knowledge, [which] excedeeth the short vehemence of any carnall pleasure” (qtd. in Daston and Park 307).

This new paradigm of productive/consumerist curiosities reflects the radical transformation undergone by desire. Prefiguring Schopenhauer, Hobbes announces the modern hypostasis of desire which, according to Terry Eagleton, “has become the protagonist of the human theatre, and human subjects themselves its mere obedient bearers or underlings”

11 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park regard Hobbes as “a seventeenth century spokesman on curiosity of stature comparable to Augustine’s” (307).
Eagleton attributes this “perceived infinity of desire” to the fact that it has become “the ruling ideology and dominant practice [in a] social order where the only end of accumulation is to accumulate afresh” (159). If appetite once belonged to the realm of human needs and was “intimately bound up with local or traditional obligation” (159), now appetite is reified and constructed as “a thing in itself, a momentous metaphysical event or self-identical force” (159). Conceived of as a demonic force, the desire to know is therefore “objectified”, externalized and cast into the very dynamic principle behind the pursuit of knowledge; as Blumenberg points out: “Die Neugierde hat nicht nur aufgehört, eines der Laster des erlösungsbedürftigen Individuums sein zu können, sondern sie hat sich von der Personalstruktur, von den psychischen Unruhe des wissenschaftlichen Prozesses selbst geworden” (464) (“curiosity is no longer able to be one of the vices of the individual in need of redemption; it has already separated itself from the structure of personality, from the psychic motive forces, and has become the mark of the hectic unrest of the scientific process itself”; 396).

The consequences of this shift are momentous: not only is the Ancient link between theoria and eudemonia, between knowledge and happiness, broken, but also it is less and less clear that “die Wahrheit werde den Menschen glücklich und frei machen” (Blumenberg, Legitimität 266) (“the truth will make men happy and free”; 232). As Lessing observes about the modern individual, “nicht durch den Besitz, sondern durch die Nachtforschung der Wahrheit erweitern sich seine Kräfte, worin allein seine immer wachsende Vollkommenheit bestehet. Der Besitz macht ruhig, träge, stolz” (qtd. in 492) “his powers are extended not through possession but through the search for truth. In this alone his ever growing perfection consists. Possession makes him lazy, indolent and proud” (qtd. in Blumenberg 420). Truth becomes secondary as curiosity becomes autonomous, an end in itself. In its constant, compulsive, industriousness resides all of its virtue.
However, the industrious curiosity of the Enlightenment is very different from the greedy curiosity of the Renaissance. It was Descartes who criticized the disordered and digressive curiosity of Galileo, archetype of Renaissance curiosity. Blumenberg sees in Descartes’s emphasis on a methodically attained knowledge “eine Art von innerszientifischer Moral, ein Rigorismus der systematischen Logik, dem die ungezügelte Wißbegierde suspect sein muß” (466) (“sort of intrascientific morality, a rigorism of systematic logic, to which the unbridled appetite for knowledge is bound to be suspect”; 397). It is this form of “morality” that Nietzsche has certainly in mind when he finds in the modern scientist and scholar a remnant of the ‘ascetic ideal’ of Platonism and Christianity. Theoretical curiosity will be regarded more and more as the sort of blind and impersonal automatism which Nietzsche will describe in Jenseits von Gut und Böse as a drive, “Enkenntnisstrieb”, “irgend ein kleines unabhängiges Uhrwerk, welches, gut aufgezogen, tapfer darauf los arbeitet, ohne dass die gesammten übrigen Triebe des Gelehrten wesentlich dabei betheiligt sind” (14) (“small, independent clockwork that, once well wound, works on vigorously without any essential participation from all the other drives of the scholar”; 14). As Paul-Laurent Assoun stresses in Freud et Nietzsche, Nietzsche is highly critical of the “hyperdéveloppement” (162) (“hyper-development”; 102) of this “cognitive instinct” in modern times, at the expense of all other instincts and life in general. Yet, Assoun insists that the Erkenntnistrieb (“cognitive instinct”) “est évoqué concurremment dans les deux registres chez Nietzsche: comme negation mortelle de la vie (la connaissance comme maladie) et comme manifestation de la puissance générique de l’instinct” (161) (“is concurrently evoked by Nietzsche in two registers, as the mortal negation of life (knowledge and sickness) and as the manifestation of the generic power instincts” (102). The Socrates of Nietzsche’s Die Geburt der Tragödie incarnates this ambivalence: on the one hand, his monstrously developed “logischen Triebe” has overshadowed all other human instincts; one the other hand, “das ungeheure
Triebad des logischen Sokratismus” (“the prodigious motor of logical Socratism”) elicits a certain degree of admiration in Nietzsche: “in diesem fessellosen Dahinströmen zeigt er eine Naturgewalt, wie wir sie nur bei den allergrößten instinctiven Kräften zu unserer schaudervollen Überraschung antreffen” (“in its unfettered outpouring it demonstrates a natural force of the sort we meet, to our shuddering surprise, only in the very greatest of all instinctive powers”).

4 Freud: Curiosity about curiosity

In Freud, our distinction between two curiosities can be aligned with the German pair Wissbegierde/Neugier – although Freud also uses Wisstrieb instead of Wissbegierde (we also find Wissensdrang, or even the infantile Sexualforschung). There are not many occurrences of Neugierde in Freud, but there is a significant one in relation with fetishism:

Bei der Einsetzung des Fetisch scheint vielmehr ein Vorgang eingehalten zu werden, der an das Haltmachen der Erinnerung bei traumatischer Amnesie gemahnt. Auch hier bleibt das Interesse wie unterwegs stehen, wird etwa der letzte Eindruck vor dem unheimlichen, traumatischen, als Fetisch festgehalten. So verdankt der Fuß oder Schuh seine Bevorzugung als Fetisch –; oder ein Stück derselben –; dem Umstand, daß die Neugierde des Knaben von unten, von den Beinen her nach dem weiblichen Genitale gespäht hat; Pelz und Samt fixieren –; wie längst vermutet wurde –; den Anblick der Genitalbehaarung, auf den der ersehnte des weiblichen Gliedes hätte folgen sollen; die so häufig zum Fetisch erkorenen Wäschstücke halten den Moment der Entkleidung fest, den letzten, in dem man das Weib noch für phallisch halten durfte. (Freud, “Fetischismus” 385)

It seems rather that when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia. As in this latter case, the subject’s interest comes to a halt half-way, as it were; it is as though the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish. Thus the foot or shoe owes its preference as a fetish – or a part of it – to the circumstance that the
inquisitive boy [Neugierde des Knaben] peered at woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up; fur and velvet – as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member; pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic. (155)

*Neugierde* is therefore comparable to the superficial and fetishist curiosity that arrests and freezes research, which prevents it from penetrating deeper into the recesses of Nature. But, there is something else: As Michèle Porte notes, *Neugierde* involves here a form of denial, of willed ignorance. She then lists the different forms that this “passion de l’ignorance” or “passion de la méconnaissance” takes in Freud: *Verdrängung, Vergessen, Verleugnung*, etc. Particularly interesting for Porte is the *Lerneifer*, which Freud mentions in his commentary on *Grandiva*. In Jensen’s novella, a young man who devotes himself to mathematics as a way to repress rather than sublimate his sexual curiosity. This example “montre derechef comment la curiosité peut être alimenté par la passion d’ignorer” (235) (“shows how curiosity can be fuelled by the passion to ignore”) (my translation).

We find the same paradox in Freud’s analysis of the *Wissbegierde* – variously translated as “instinct for knowledge”, “epistemophilic instinct or drive”, or even epistemophilia. For Freud, *Wissbegierde* is a secondary formation arising from the scopophilic drive (*Shaulust*) as well as the (sadistic) instinct of mastery – “im Grunde ein sublimierter, ins Intellektuelle gehobener Sprößling des Bemächtigungstriebes” (“Disposition”, 450) (“a sublimated offshoot of the instinct of mastery exalted into something intellectual”; 324). In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*, Freud traces the *Wissbegierde* back to “infantile Sexualforschung” (105) (“infantile sexual researches”; 27). With the onset of sexual repression, the fate of the instinct for research becomes intertwined with the sexual instincts and
can follow three different routes. Escaping both the “inhibition of thought” and “neurotic compulsive thinking” (29), Leonardo would be an example of “[d]er dritte, seltenste und vollkommenste, Typus” (106) (“the third type, which is the rarest and most perfect”; 29) in which (“die Libido entzieht sich dem Schicksal der Verdrängung, indem sie sich von Anfang an in Wißbegierde sublimiert und sich zu dem kräftigen Forschertrieb als Verstärkung schlägt” (106) (“the libido evades the fate of repression by being sublimated from the very beginning into curiosity and by becoming attached to the powerful instinct for research as a reinforcement”; 29). Yet, in this case as well, “das Forschen [wird] gewissermaßen zum Zwang und zum Ersatz der Sexualbetätigung” (106) (“the research becomes to a certain extent compulsive and a substitute for sexual activity”; 29) involving, moreover, a certain repression by which the research instinct will avoid any “sexual themes” (30). It is as if the libido sciendi (Wissbegierde) refused to acknowledge and look into its own libidinal origins. To refer to the sexual instincts, Freud introduces here “Eros”, thus anticipating his dualistic model of Eros and Thanatos, life and death drives, which he will develop ten years later in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Freud remarks about Leonardo’s writings: “Sie weichen allem Sexuellen so entschieden aus, als ware allein der Eros, der alles Lebende erhält, kein würdiger stoff für den Wissensdrang der Forscher” (97) (“anything sexual is so resolutely shunned that it seems as though Eros alone, the preserver of all that lives, is unworthy to be the object of the scientist’s thirst for knowledge”; 17).

Essential in Freud’s account is the component of repression, the desire not to know, the “passion de l’ignorance”, as constitutive raison d’être of the Wissbegierde. As Freud himself acknowledges at the end of his essay, the most baffling thing about Leonardo is that we find side by side “seine ganz besondere Neigung zu Triebverdrängungen und seine außerordentliche Fähigkeit zur Sublimierung der primitive Triebe” (157) (“his quite special tendency towards instinctual repressions, and his extraordinary capacity for sublimating the primitive instincts”);
Sublimation not only replaces the immediate aim of the sexual instincts by “andere, eventuell höher gewertete und nicht Sexuelle, Ziele” (104) (“other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual”; 26), but, more importantly, it hides and conceals sublimation’s own libidinal origins. As Paul Ricoeur has observed in *De l’Interprétation. Essai sur Freud*, Freud’s “sublimation” represents “un noeud de difficultés extrêmement ramifiées” (190) (“a complex of highly ramified difficulties”; 178). For Ricoeur, sublimation has to do with the sublime and it designates “le processus par lequel, avec du désir, l’homme fait de l’idéal, du suprême, c’est-à-dire du sublime” (190) (“the process by which man, with his desires, effects the ideal, the supreme, that is to say, the sublime”; 178). Freud himself introduces his essay on Leonardo by stating that his purpose is not, quoting Schiller, “das Strahlende zu schwärzen und das Erhabene in den Staub zu ziehn” (91) (“to blacken the radiant and drag the sublime into the dust”; 8); yet, however unpleasant this might sound, the truth is that the sublime, “higher” regions of the psyche, like genius and creativity, are rooted in a primordial libidinal soil. This reference to the high and the low conjures up Freud’s topographical models. Not only that of the Unconscious, Preconscious and Conscious but that of the id, ego and superego. For, according to Ricoeur, the notion of sublimation is intimately related to those of desexualisation and identification, and therefore key to understanding the formation of the superego. Freud’s insight, in Ricoeur’s words, is to unmask the “proximité dissimulé du désir et du sublime – en language topique, du ça et du surmoi” (198) (“hidden affinity between desire and the sublime – in topographical language, between the id and the superego”; 186). *The Ego and the Id* contains an illustration showing the two topographical models superimposed; however, the superego is not represented in the illustration. Had the superego been represented, it would not have occupied the higher regions but would rather have been in the depths, near the Id at the furthest remove from consciousness. It is this constitutive proximity that a sublimated *libido scienti* actively ignores.
Freud is therefore unmasking the works of desire at the highest, sublime, psychic regions. As it turns out, our lofty, theoretical curiosity bears out the traces of an infantile, voyeuristic, curiosity.

According to Freud, the superego is formed by “introjection” of (paternal) authority. This interiorization of authority could be extended to what we have called the “taming of curiosity” as referring both to the ontogenetic and philogenetic, individual and historical, levels: thus, from a curiosity banned and constrained by religious authorities, we move to the disciplined curiosity of modern disciplines ruled by “eine Art von innerszentifischer Moral, ein Rigorismus der systematischen Logik” (Blumenberg, Legitimität 466) (“a sort of intrascientific morality, a rigorism of systematic logic”; 397). This is nothing other than the process of “disciplinarization of knowledges” and which translates, on the discursive level, into a shift from the “censorship of statements” to the “disciplinarization of enunciations”, from orthodoxy to “orthology” (Foucault 184), or, in Eagleton expression, a gradual shift from coercion to consent. As Eagleton, following Foucault, writes in The Ideology of the Aesthetic: “Power is shifting its location from centralized institutions to the silent, invisible depths of the subject itself” (27). Eagleton adds: “this shift is also part of a profound political emancipation in which freedom and compassion, the imagination and the bodily affections strive to make themselves heard within the discourse of repressive rationalism” (27-8). It is in this context that “the aesthetic moves into the foreground” (Eagleton 23), but this is also what makes it radically ambivalent: the aesthetic is the site of all naturalizations and inscriptions of power and authority in the body; yet, the ambiguity and “danger” of the aesthetic is that “there is something in the body which can revolt against the power which inscribes it” (28): that’s why a disciplined curiosiy is always capable of reverting to a dispersing curiosity. It is this very dialectical conflict that structures the works studied in this dissertation, between, on the one hand, the disciplined curiosity which tries to inscribe itself in the body, to turn it into a transparent and docile medium for the enactment of the machine of
knowledge; and, on the other hand, a centrifugal curiosity which should be not regarded as necessarily free or emancipating, for, as a dialectical opposite of a disciplined curiosity, it tends also to be fetishist and consumerist.

However tempting this narrative of the concomitant sublimation of desire and the progressive interiorization of power structures, it might easily lead to a sort of, to use Ricoeur’s expression, “solipsisme du désir” (512) (“solipsism of desire”; 489). This is one of the advantages of speaking in terms of curiosity, instead of a desire to know; for curiosity refers also to a coalescence of that desire in the form of a “curious” thing. Freud himself can hardly be accused of this “solipsism of desire”; for, as Ricoeur insightfully points out, the concept of sublimation is an expression of a fundamental Freudian deadlock, a failed compromise between a solipsistic “energetic monism” and a dualism between desire and authority:

12 This solipsism is not so removed from that discursive solipsism that Bourdieu pinpoints in Foucault. In *Les règles de l’art*, Bourdieu refers to Foucault’s “absolutism of discourse” as characteristic of the cultural field when it has reached a high degree of autonomy. But by reducing everything to discourse, according to Bourdieu, Foucault is condemned to see the history of episteme as governed by a mysterious Selbsbewegung.
Ricoeur argues that Freud lacks the theoretical instruments to overcome the gap between these two sides of sublimation and account for “la dialectique absolument primitive du désir et de l’autre que le désir” (512) (“the absolutely primal dialectic between desire and the other than desire”; 490). As we will see, to a large extent, this other of desire is also played in Freud by reality and the reality principle.

5 “The work is finite; theory is infinite”

However, before looking at the relation between the desire to know and its object, the “real world”, Freud’s analysis of Wissbegierde deserves closer attention. It is in his unique and very personal essay on Leonardo da Vinci, paradigm of Renaissance curiosity, that Freud examines in detail the “instinct for knowledge” and its vicissitudes; this essay is particularly interesting for our purposes because through the figure of Leonardo, Freud seems to be pondering as well about his own curiosity and the relation between the scientist and the artist, between research and creation. Freud is interested in the progressive and concurrent inhibition of Leonardo’s sexuality and artistic output. His tendency to leave his works unfinished and his slowness will gradually grow in importance as his interest in science began to interfere with his artistic interest. Although his passion for science, his drive for knowledge, was first in the service of his art, “endlich riß ihn der übermächtig gewordene Trieb fort, bis der Zusammenhang mit den Anforderungen seiner Kunst zerriß” (103) (“finally the instinct, which had become overwhelming, swept him away until the connection with the demands of his art was severed”; 24). His research was at first a means to an end, the completion of a work of art, but it gradually turned into a labyrinthine diversion which became an end in itself. Analysing Leonardo’s statement that “great love springs from great knowledge of the beloved object”; qtd in 21), Freud argues that in the end “Aus dem Aufschub, erst zu lieben nachdem man erkannt hat, wird ein
Ersatz‖ (102) (“the postponement of loving until full knowledge is acquired ends in a substitution of the latter for the former”; 23). This substitution of love by knowledge, of Eros by Logos, is seen by Freud as regressive and ultimately fruitless. From Freud’s remark that “Man hat geforscht, anstatt zu handeln, zu shaffn” (102) (“Investigating has also been known to take the place of acting and creating”; 23), Blumenberg concludes: “Das Werk ist endlich, die Theorie unendlich” (525) (“The work is finite; theory is infinite”; 451). Wissbegierde turns out to be, paradoxically, very similar to our dissipating curiosity: a fruitless expenditure of energy.

Wissbegierde is from the beginning associated by Freud to the “compulsive brooding” of neurotics which originates in the “brooding” of “infantile sexual researches”: “der unabschließbare Charakter der Kinderforschung wiederholt sich auch darin, daß das gesuchte intellektuelle Gefühl der Lösung immer weiter in die Ferne rückt” (106) (“[T]he interminable character of the child’s researches is also repeated in the fact that this brooding never ends and that the intellectual feeling, so much desired, of having found a solution recedes more and more into the distance”; 29). Yet, and this is a profound insight, in the case of neurotics and children, it is not that “theory is infinite” and that the attainment of full knowledge is impossible and therefore always differed. Instead, it turns out that that the vagaries of a wandering curiosity and the space of postponement opened by curiosity are the result of an avoidance:

Von der Wissbegierde der kleinen Kinder zeugt deren unermüdliche Fragelust, die dem Erwachsenen rätselhaft ist, solange er nicht versteht, daß alle diese Fragen nur Umschweife sind und daß sie kein Ende nehmen können, weil das Kind durch sie nur eine Frage ersetzen will, die es doch nicht stellt. (105)

The curiosity of small children is manifested in their untiring love of asking questions; this is bewildering to the adult so long as he fails to understand that all these questions are merely circumlocutions and that they cannot come to an end because the
child is only trying to make them take the place of a question which he does not ask. (27)

Fundamental to our purpose is this insight that the indefatigable Wissbegierde, always probing into the secrets of Nature, entails a constitutive blind spot, its own origin, and by extension, the (bodily and social) conditions for its own manifestation. And this, even though Leonardo was certainly interested in the body, not any particular or “real” body, but the idealized (maternal) body. Wissbegierde does not so much wander away as gravitate around a central blind spot, which nonetheless exert an invisible centripetal pull. In the end, the desire to know rests on – and is even fuelled by – a hard core of ignorance. Ignorance not only of its own libidinal original, but also of the economic and social conditions that make possible its activity; in other words, that form of repression which Bourdieu names the “disposition scolastique” (“scholastic disposition”) and which “incline à mettre en suspens les exigencies de la situation, les contraintes de la nécessité économique et sociale, et les urgences qu’elle impose ou les fins qu’elle propose” (24) (“inclines its possessors to suspend the demands of the situation, the constraint of economic and social necessity, and the urgencies it imposes or the ends it proposes”; 12). The interest of Freud’s analysis and its relevance to our purpose is that it is a self-reflective meditation about the curiosity for curiosity, which ends up revealing curiosity’s own constitutive blind spot, its own repressed origin and presuppositions.

As we have just seen, Freud seems to be pathologizing the Wissbegierde as a regressive – neurotic – instinct, which only became dominant in Leonardo after an initial phase “von männlicher Schaffenskraft und künstlerischer Produktivität in Mailand” (154-155) (“masculine creative power and artistic productiveness in Milan”; 95) and once he has lost his patron, and “father-substitute”, the duke Lodovico Moro. In Le désir de savoir, Regis Dorey argues that the absent father-figure is responsible for Leonardo’s “symbolic deficiency”; as a result, there is in
Leonardo a predominance of the imaginary register – importance of the double in Leonardo’s personality (mirror writing, ambidextria, etc.) – and of the “maternal imago”: Nature must be observed and described with the utmost care and respect, which renders simultaneously difficult the passage to abstraction, to symbolization, indispensable for “scientific creation”. However, the role of the father-figure is ambivalent: on the one hand, Freud first argues that, as a creative artist, Leonardo experiences a “Zwang, den Vater zu kopieren und zu übertreffen” (144) (“compulsion to copy and to outdo his father; 81) – counting with the additional, strong, father-figure of his patron: he creates his paintings and then cares no more about them “wie sein Vater sich nicht um ihn bekümmert hatte” (144) (“just as his father had not cared about him”; 81); on the other hand, it is the rebellion – or absence, it is not clear which – of a father-figure in childhood which explains “vom Vater ungehemmte infantile Sexualforschung” (145) (“the existence of infantile sexual researches uninhibited by his father”; 81) which will later give way to the unfettered Wissbegierde of this “erste moderne Naturforscher” (145) (“first modern natural scientist”; 82) who will repudiate the authorities of Antiquity as well as dogmatic religion – all extensions and “exaltations” of the father. Similarly, the mother, the other side of the parental complex, is an equally ambivalent figure. Just as the father appears as a “großartige Sublimierung” (146) (“grand sublimation”; 83) of “der all-mächtige, gerechte Gott” (146) (“the almighty and just God”; 83), the mother is a sublimation of an idealised “gütige Natur” (146) (“kindly Nature”; 83); at the same time, the Nature to which, according to Freud, Leonardo resigns himself in his last years is not so much a benevolent and sympathetic Nature; rather, it is a distant and unfathomable one: Freud finishes his essay by quoting Leonardo: “La natura è piena d’infinite ragioni che non furono mai in isperienza” (qtd. in 159) (“[Nature] is full of countless causes that never enter experience”; qtd. in 100). Nature might perhaps be like the smile of Mona Lisa which contains a double meaning: “das Versprechen schrankenloser
Zärtlichkeit wie die unheilverkündigende Drohung” (139) (“the promise of unbounded tenderness and at the same time sinister menace”; 76); Nature is both the regressive phantasm of a return to the maternal bosom and the incarnation of Ananké, deity of fate and death.

In this ambivalence, Paul Ricoeur sees an unresolved conflict in Freud between scientism and Romanticism, between “lucidité sans illusion et l’amour de la vie” (355) (“lucidity free of illusion and the love of life”; 337). Leo Bersani highlights the “theoretical turbulence” of Leonardo, which he attributes to the following reasons:

Freud’s own inability to be theoretically conclusive (and even consistent), his divided feelings about conclusiveness and consistency, and ... his unarticulated sense of the enormous theoretical consequences of what he has to say about the origins and the value of the radically conclusive mind (‘Representation and its Discontents’, 10)

In the end, what is at stake for Freud is the status of his own theorizing, which was for him an enduring source of anxiety. In Freud, Proust and Lacan, Malcom Bowie devotes a chapter, “Freud’s dreams of knowledge”, to the epistemological imagery of Freud and his particular conquistadorial and archaeological imagery. Bowie notes “a repeated attempt to impart a surface of phallic self-assertion to what could otherwise have seemed, to a former cerebral anatomist, the ‘feminine’ softness and deliquescence of mere theorizing” (38). Yet, Freud remains ambivalent: for all his envy of the “hard” sciences and his attempts to reach and establish the scientific bedrock of psychoanalysis, in science, he seemed to price above everything not so much the penetrating insight into the absolute truths and laws of Nature, as the scientific attitude per se. As he writes to Marie Bonaparte:

13 Examining Freud’s references to biology, Bowie argues that biology was for him “the lost kingdom of truth and certitude” (40).
Mediocre spirits demand of science a kind of certainty which it cannot give, a sort of religious satisfaction. Only the real, rare, true scientific minds can endure doubt, which is attached to all our knowledge. I always envy the physicists and mathematicians who can stand on firm ground. I hover, so to speak, in the air. (qtd. In Bowie, 44).

The “certainty” to which Freud attributes a “religious satisfaction” is reminiscent of Flaubert’s famous and much quoted pronouncement in a letter to his friend Bouilhet: “la bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure.” The problem with “conclusions” is that they can easily crystallize into commonplaces or idées reçues arresting and freezing curiosity, that Wissbegierde whose duty should be to relentlessly tear down idols and illusions. And, at the same time, Wissbegierde can easily degenerate into a regressive and compulsive dissolving force akin to the death drive.

There is in Freud a true deconstruction of the opposition between active and passive, emancipating and alienating poles. The tension at core of our dissertation is precisely between two contradictory demands: an endless and inconclusive pursuit of knowledge – theoretical knowledge and the subject of knowledge as unfinished projects by definition – and the need to “conclude” a literary work – to cure in the case of psychoanalysis.

We find a similar tension at work in the monumental works of “high modernism”. In his recent introduction to Modernism, Eysteinsson describes these works as “towering”: “[A]t once overwhelming, ascetic, and monadical, they seem to stand like ivory towers in the landscape of more mundane affairs, and this appreciation (whether expressed in positive or negative terms) tends to carry over into modernism as a concept (or perhaps primarily into ‘high modernism’)” (3). Yet, these monumental works often stage their own demise betraying contradictions very

14 Gustave Flaubert in a letter to Louis Bouilhet (September 4th, 1850).
similar to the ones we have just seen in Freud. Thus, the tower of knowledge erected by Flaubert’s two autodidact encyclopaedists becomes a true Babel where a multitude of disciplines and specialities speak different languages; in the end, the towering encyclopaedia is deflated into a “farcical encyclopaedia”, a circular and endless pursuit as the two protagonists become copyists once more. In Die Blendung, Peter Kien owns Vienna’s largest private library. Situated in an attic whose windows have been walled-up, Kien’s library is the true materialization of the ivory tower; yet this massive monument, image (Bild) of a petrified Bildung, will eventually be devoured by the flames. In Borges’s El Aleph, this phallic ideal of knowledge attains its ultimate (phantasmic) realization only to be exposed as a farcical fall from knowledge: the point from which one can cast a surveying view on the whole universe is located not anymore on the top of an (ivory) tower but in a dark basement: the tower of knowledge is exposed as merely concealing a void, abyss of ignorance – or well of science.

6 The Object of Curiosity

This dialectic between a blind and compulsive drive for knowledge penetrating always deeper into the heart of things and a fetishist, superficial curiosity jumping from one phantasmic object to the next cannot constitute our last interpretative horizon. For, we run the risk of falling into a solipsism of desire, which goes here hand in hand with another form of solipsism, discursive solipsism; in both cases there is no room for an “other” – of desire and of discourse. In this respect, Foucault’s suggestive essay, La Bibliothèque fantastique (“Fantasia of the Library”) is exemplary in that it presents literature as the site of the parallel proliferation of the symbolic and the imaginary. Foucault regards Flaubert’s last novel as paradigmatic of the withdrawal of literature into a phantasmatic library, into a purely discursive realm, and reduces the novel to a book about books. As the voices of the two protagonists become increasingly contaminated by
the books they read, the novel seems to acknowledge its own inability to say the world, a world which is reduced to the phantasmagoria arising from a cacophony of discourses. The library becomes a metaphor for an autonomous – and therefore, anti-mimetic and self referentially discursive – literature. Yet, the phantasm of library is radically ambivalent, seen concurrently as a space of autonomy and of alienation. Nowhere is this ambivalence more vivid than in Borges’ Library of Babel, ultimate metaphor of the absence of a *hors-texte*, in which, paradoxically, an infinite and unbounded library appears as an even more claustrophobic prison-house of language.

This interpretation is based on a triple identification, well documented in the case of Flaubert. It has become a commonplace of the critique to regard Bouvard and Pécuchet as *alter egos* of Flaubert himself who, after twenty years of intense “research”, came to resemble uncannily the two autodidacts of his novel, thereby turning their progressive isolation and alienation from the world into a literary work celebrating the emancipating autonomy of literature. But, as Yvan Leclerc lucidly remarks, the risk of identifying with Flaubert’s two copyists can also be found among the readers and especially among the commentators of *Bouvard*, who are as a result caught and sucked into the universal discursive tide at work in Flaubert’s novel15.

In “Flaubert’s encyclopaedism”, Leo Bersani’s argues that *Bouvard* is a perfect example of literature’s “aesthetization of discourses” – “Art is, by definition, an ontological relocation of the materials of philosophy and science” (163). Bersani concludes that in Flaubert’s novel “style caresses an encyclopaedic culture out of its projects of mastery and into a liberalizing impotence” (164). The radical ambivalence of Flaubert’s aesthetical gesture is condensed in the

15 See “R. B. et B. P.: Barthes lecteur de Bouvard” in Yvan Leclerc’s *La Spirale et le monument* (171).
closing words, that “liberalizing impotence” which celebrates the liberating autonomy of literature while lamenting its resulting alienation from the world. Yet, we find something else in Bersani, mainly, the possibility of imagining an “other” of desire and discourse: “By severing knowledge from its sources, its reception, and its possible uses, [Flaubert] emphasizes the autonomy of representations, thus suggesting that the effect of our inclination to represent the real is, by virtue of an ontological necessity, to alienate us from objects of representation (161). In other words, the external world, reality, has been evacuated from literature by the very desire and curiosity for it. In these caricatural portrayals of an all-devouring greed to assimilate and incorporate the world through symbolic systems, reality appears both as the indigestible thing which resists curiosity and as its leftover.

Brought to its ultimate consequences, Bersani’s observation means that there is an intimate link between a blind and compulsive drive for knowledge and a reality experienced as inaccessible and meaningless. We are reminded here of the Kantian Thing-in-itself. Indeed, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton draws an interesting connection between the Thing-in-itself and the epistemophilic drive in modernity:

The thing-in-itself is thus a kind of empty signifier of that total knowledge which the bourgeoisie never ceases to dream of, but which its own fragmenting, dissevering activities continually frustrate. In the act of knowing, the subject cannot help but project from its inevitable partial perspective the phantasmal possibility of a knowledge beyond all categories, which then risks striking what it can know meagrely relative. The subject languishes in the grip of a rabid epistemophilia which is at once logical to its project – to hold the world in a single thought! – and potentially subversive to it. For such metaphysical delusions simply distract it from the proper business of actual knowledge, which must be always knowledge from one perspective or another (77).
Eagleton’s critique of the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* is anchored in Lukács’ notion of “reification” which is, according to him, consubstantial to thought’s “commodified categories”. The Thing-in-itself is therefore “less some suprasensible entity than the material limit of all such reificatory thought, a faint echo of the real’s mute resistance to it” (77). This “real” defined as a resistance is nothing else than the Lacanian Real, to which Eagleton, like Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, resort in their critique of Kant. One of the many definitions of Lacan’s elusive notion of the Real can be found in his *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*: “Le réel se distingue … par sa séparation du champ du principe du plaisir, par sa déssexualisation, par le fait que son économie, par suite, admet quelque chose de nouveau, qui est justement l’impossible” (188) (“The real is distinguished … by its separation from the field of the pleasure principle, by its desexualization, by the fact that its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible”; 167). What is interesting about this notion of the “Real” is that it points not so much to the external, objective, world, as to the subject’s desire. Indeed, we have here the meeting of two impossibilities: on the side of the “object”, no object can come to “embody” the empty signifier of total knowledge – any singular object cast into this role is merely a temporary fetish; but also on the side of the “subject”, total knowledge cannot be subjectified, it cannot be “embodied”.

It is important to remember that this negative conception of reality as a form of “resistance”, an obstacle, is rooted in Freud’s “reality principle”. The Lacanian interpretation of the “reality principle” is based on the form that this principle takes in the later Freud – the Freud of Eros and Thanatos – as Ananke, the deity of Necessity. The reality principle is thus imbued with the tragic dimension of being human and points to death and the destruction of all consolatory illusions: “Ananké est le nom de la réalité sans nom, pour qui a ‘renoncé au père.’ C’est aussi bien le hasard, l’absence de rapports entre les lois de la nature et nos désirs et nos
illusions‖ (Ricoeur 345) (“Ananke is the name of nameless reality, for those who have ‘renounced their father.’ It is also chance, the absence of relationship between the laws of nature and our desires or illusions”; 328).

In “Formulierungen über die Zwei Prinzipien des Psychischen Geschehens” (“Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning”), Freud argues that art achieves a “Versöhnung” (“reconciliation”) of the pleasure principle and reality principle “in a peculiar way” (41); for Freud, artists turn away from reality into their own fantasies; however: “Er findet aber den Rückweg aus dieser Phantasiewelt zur Realität, indem er dank besonderer Begabungen seine Phantasien zu einer neuen Art von Wirklichkeiten gestaltet, die von den Menschen als wertvolle Abbilder der Realität zur Geltung zugelassen werden” (236-7) (“He finds the way back to reality, however, from this world of phantasy by making use of special gifts to mould his phantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality”; 42). More interesting than this endorsement of an old-fashioned mirror-like notion of literary mimesis is his final observation that the artist is successful “weil die anderen Menschen die nämliche Unzufriedenheit mit dem real erforderlichen Verzicht verspüren wie er selbst, weil diese bei der Ersetzung des Lustprinzips durch das Realitätsprinzip resultierende Unzufriedenheit selbst ein Stück der Realität ist” (237) (“because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he does with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because that dissatisfaction, which results from the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, is itself a part of reality”; 42). This conception of literature might appear crude and naive, yet it is an essential component of any reading of our narratives of curiosity. For reality appears in them not only as an inaccessible and negative Real whose positive presentation can only be an illusive, even hallucinatory, representation; “reality” is also something more down-to-earth and commonsensical, which corresponds to a more traditional, less tragic and more scientist,
interpretation of Freud’s reality principle, understood in cognitive, adaptative terms. “Reality” is not only defined as an accurate (re)presentation of the external world in the mind, but also as a (socially) accepted one: in his “Metapsychologische Ergänzung zum Traumlehre” (“Metapsychology of Dreams”), Freud himself establishes a connection between reality principle, consciousness and the ego: “Die Realitätsprüfung werden wir als eine der großen Institutionen des Ichs neben die uns bekannten gewordenen Zensuren” (424) (“we shall place reality-testing among the major institution of the ego, alongside the censorships”; Metapsychology 241). Because human beings are social animals and, as Furth points out in “Desire and Knowledge”, reality refers mainly to “social reality”; to the extent that “[s]ublimated in the context of drives means socialized just as real in the context of knowledge and reality means socialized” (168). From this point of view, reality is always inscribed in a particular doxa. In conclusion, I will argue with Christopher Prendergast (The Order of Mimesis) that the “anti-mimetic” reading our narratives of curiosity positing an unfathomable reality resisting the desire of our curieux, can only take place against the backdrop of a literal, doxic narrative. In fact, this dissertation examines satirical narratives in which the “naïvely” mimetic aspect is exacerbated; the source of humour is precisely the caricatural proverbial fate of our curieux. Rather than considered as a “curiosity”, a remnant of a naive realism in modernist narratives that seem otherwise to announce post-modernist anti-mimetic stance, the “mimetic” reading is not only legitimate but fundamental to preserve the radical ambivalence of these works.

16 “The very condition of an anti-mimetic reading is the equally valid possibility of a strictly mimetic reading” (Prendergast 16). In his Conclusion to the collection of essays, Aesthetics and Politics, Jameson similarly argues: “These apparently irreconcilable positions may prove to be two distinct and equally indispensable moments of the hermeneutic process itself – a first ‘naïve’ ‘belief’ in the density or presence of novelistic representation, and a later ‘bracketing’ of that experience in which the necessary distance of all language from what it claims to represent – its substitutions and displacements – are explored” (204)
7 The curious spectacle of curiosity

As we said in the introduction, these narratives of curiosity are not only narratives of a desire that resists a fixation, necessarily reifying; there is another possible reading of these narratives as meaningful, cautionary narratives about a compulsive and meaningless drive for knowledge. In fact, these modern satires of curiosity read as variations on the anecdote of Thales and Thracian Maid which Socrates refers in Plato’s *Theaetetus*:

The jest which the clever witty Thracian handmaid is said to have made about Thales, when he fell into a well as he was looking up at the stars. She said that he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven, that he could not see what was before his feet. This is a jest which is equally applicable to all philosophers. (146)

The interest of this proverb-like anecdote, which offers a farcical account of the “Fall”, is that its apparent simplicity is complicated by the different perspectives involved. The main source of ambivalence is Socrates’ attitude: it is not clear whether he identifies with the lofty aspirations of Thales and the difficulties and the ridicule the philosopher faces in the real world; or whether he identifies with the laughter of the maid; after all, according to Cicero, Socrates, unlike Thales, “was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens, to make it at home in the cities, to introduce it into people’s homes and to require it to investigate life, customs, and the difference between good and evil” (qtd in Blumenberg 247).17 Hans Blumenberg has devoted a book, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin: eine Urgeschichte der Theorie*, to the “imaginative potential” of this archetypical scene of theory – Greek *theoria* – which has been recurrent in philosophy’s attempts to picture its place in the world. It holds a similar interest for us in relation to literature; until

17 More recently, Jacques Taminiaux examines a modern restaging of the anecdote in *The Thracian Maid and Philosophical Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*. 
now, we have often not properly distinguished the different levels of interpretation, and have conflated the different desires, and curiosities, at work in these narratives, and, in particular, the problem of how these narratives about curiosity mirror the authors’ and the readers’ own curiosity.

There is an element of farcical slapstick in Thales’s Fall, an ironic reversal of Socrates’s own depiction of the philosopher elsewhere in *Theaetatus* as a strange creature whose body “sojourns in his city, while his thought, disdainful of such things as worthless, takes wing, as Pindar says, ‘beyond the sky, beneath the earth’, searching the heavens and measuring the plains, everywhere seeking true nature of everything as a whole, never sinking to what lies close at hand” (146). This sovereign and surveying theoretical gaze has a clear link to the divine, suggested moreover by the root *thea*. Indeed, Socrates continues: “[The philosopher] take[s] flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the divine so far as we can”. Yet, in his efforts to attain the absolute, surveying gaze of the divine, a view from nowhere, a gaze beyond any gaze, the philosopher makes a fool of himself in the eyes of the Thracian maid. In *Theatrum Theoreticum*, Rodolphe Gasché argues that *theoria* becomes theatrical “as soon as this observer, in turn, becomes seen, and even steps forth into the light to be beheld” and opens a space for “a play between the gazes that suggests no limit. Seeing, here, is seen abysmally, without end in sight” (146). The reason is that the theatre of theory is played on multiple scenes: the philosopher is performing for a very diverse public: not only the maid – and “the whole rabble” in Socrates’s own words – but also the other philosophers and disciples; yet, ultimately, the philosopher is performing for the gods themselves: “The theoretician not only seeks to contemplate the divine. His act consists in emulating the way of looking that pertains to the gods, hence, of playing their role for them to view on the stage of this world” (146). By doing this, the theoretician “aims at bringing the infinite exchange of gazes to a stop, and, thus, at neutralizing
the theatrical space of theory” (146). Theoretical vision is trying to “see itself by itself” (147). Yet, it can never make the gods’ gaze its own: theory “cannot complete the closure of seeing’s being seen by itself” (147) and is condemned to see itself as a silly spectacle, “exotic ritual” (137), in the eyes of a maid who cannot see what the philosopher sees.

Rodolphe Gasché regards the anecdote of Thales as the “primal scene” of theory in which the “theoretical gaze seeks to see what it looks like, what its looks look like – in short to see itself” (131). This reference to the “primal scene” points to something hidden and repressed; we could therefore speak of theoretical curiosity. Originally, although theoria referred to a contemplative gaze, it was also used in the context of religious festivities and involved a participating and “being present”; according to Karl Kerényi, quoted by Gasché, Greek festivities were “a reciprocal, active and passive, vision, a spectacle in which men are both viewers and viewed” (qtd. 142). Theoria took place in the open, in a cosmos that was still thought of as naturally bright and filled with light. In parallel with the process of cosmological de-lumination described by Blumenberg as the “flight of the light”, the Ancient model of theoretical vision was progressively substituted by a new model encapsulated in the Cartesian “chambre obscure” (“camara obscura”) and “perspective” in painting, which Bourdieu defines as “un point de vue sur lequel on ne prend pas de point de vue” (Bourdieu, Méditations 33) (“a point a view on which no point of view can be taken”; 33). As theory tries to conceal its own origin and bodily support, we can speak of curiosity, which has often being imagined as a hidden, stealthy gaze, anonymously looking from behind a keyhole. Rather than the reciprocity of seeing and being seen, we have the Freudian instinctual ambivalence of an (active) scopophilia and a (passive) exhibitionism. The disembodied curious gaze that aspires to erase its own bodily support and identify itself with the divine view from nowhere, gaze beyond any gaze, is exhibited in all its obscene voyeurism.
As a primal, phantasmatic scene, the focus of interest of the anecdote of Thales is precisely the gaze(s) for which this fantasy is staged. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Slavoj Žižek argues that “fantasy proper is not the scene itself that attracts our fascination, but the imagined/inexistent gaze observing it” (229). This impossible gaze is nothing other than the Lacanian Real, a place impossible to occupy, but simultaneously inescapable. It is the place that our curieux in their megalomaniac dreams of omniscience aspire in all seriousness to occupy, making fools of themselves. The moment a sublimated, soaring theoretical curiosity seems to reach the phantasm of a disembodied and sovereign gaze, it is exposed as a mere prying, voyeuristic curiosity. Nowhere is this more obvious that in Borges’ *El Aleph* in which these two curiosities end up collapsing: it is from a little opening in the basement stairs that the Aleph is located, point where the whole universe is contained.

The impossible gaze is not only thematized in the narratives, it is a position that the narrator – and the author himself – as well as the reader are asked to occupy. Flaubert’s aspiration to the status of a supremely detached, omniscient, quasi-divine onlooker is well known: “se placer tout d’un bond au-dessus de l’humanité et n’avoir avec elle rien de commun, qu’un rapport d’œil”18 (“placing oneself above the rest of humanity in a leap so as to have nothing in common with it, except for an eye-based relationship”) (my translation). Yet, as Peter Brooks observes about Flaubert himself:

The nineteenth-century realist novel is in this sense less ‘panoptical’ than the work of Michel Foucault might lead us to believe: the guardian in his watchtower never can see everything .... Narrators are in fact more nearly voyeurs than watchmen; their post of observation is at the keyhole rather than in the tower. (*Body* 105)

18 Letter to Louise Colet, 22 avril 1853.
In the end, this tension between the watchman and the voyeur is never evacuated because it is constitutive of literature conceived of as the site where the phantasm of an absolute gaze, of omniscience, can legitimately subsist for the very reason that it is also the site where this phantasm is ridiculed in all its grotesqueness. Similarly, the gaze for which these modernist narratives are staged is double: as in the case of Thales’s anecdote, it is, on the one hand, the gaze of those who seek in literature that supreme total vision which can no longer be found within a compartmentalized culture; on the other hand, it is also the amused gaze of maid, laughing at the ridiculously overblown aspirations of literature.
Chapter 2

*Bouvard et Pécuchet: An Encyclopaedic Curiosity*

Despite the progressive rehabilitation of the once sinful *curiositas* after the Renaissance, the old distinction between “good” and “bad” curiosity was to be surprisingly perpetuated by an increasingly rigorist Science. By the 18th century, the term *curieux* tended to be used to refer to the “low” form of curiosity. In Daston and Park’s wonderful *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, we read:

> A 1736 Parisian sale catalogue of a new shipment of exotic seashells distinguished between two classes of customers: the naturalists (*Physiciens*) who exercised the “recreation of the mind” by discovering the causes of the various forms of shells, and the curious (*Curieux*) who sought the ‘recreation of the eye’ from ‘the variety of forms and colors with which they [the shells] are ornamented.’ (326)

In the 18th century, curiosity appears thus split between the self-possessed curiosity of the naturalist, actively looking for the causes of things, and the gaping curiosity of the *curieux*. A similar distinction at the heart of this desire, “louable ou blamable, utile ou nuisible, sage ou fou” (“praiseworthy or blameable, useful or harmful, wise or foolish”) (my translation), is also found in the *Encyclopédie*’s entry for “Curiosité” (“curiosity”): on the one hand, there is a praiseworthy “noble curiosité” (“noble curiosity”) “envie de s’instruire et s’éclairer” (“desire to educate oneself and be enlightened”) which demands sustained attention, “un travail, une application continue” (“continuous work and application”); on the other hand, the “curiosité pour toutes sortes de choses nouvelles [qui] est l’apanage de l’oisiveté” (“curiosity for all kinds of novelties, [which] is the portion of the lazy”; qtd. in Daston and Park 328). The industrious curiosity of the natural philosopher is thus set against the fleeting curiosity of the dilettantish collector of “curiosities”.
Despite the perpetuation of a two-sided curiosity, modern curiosity is fundamentally different from ancient *curiositas*. The Renaissance brought about a radical transformation of old *curiositas*. As Daston and Park argue, the curiosity of the modern scientist “replaced the earlier dynamic of self-dissipating passivity with one of self-disciplined activity, all faculties marshalled and bent to the quest” (308). Nonetheless, a “self-dissipating” *curiositas* remained as a distracting – both disruptive and inconsequential – low form of curiosity, unworthy of the learned. Surely, as we have already seen, the split between two curiosities had always been consubstantial to *curiosity*: Augustine’s sinful, aimless and idle *curiositas*, which he opposed to inward contemplation, was initially a secondary meaning grafted on a Roman virtuous care-ful *curiositas*. In fact, the distinction between a “bad” and a “good” curiosity had persisted during the Middle Ages. With the rise of empirical science, there had been a momentary reconciliation of the two curiosities in the 17th century, when the curious gaze of the scientist stared in renewed wonder at the curious multiplicity of the world. However, by the 18th century, the divide between the two curiosities had been somehow reinstated: as part of the process of “disciplinarization of knowledges”19, the “curiosity” of the professional scientist was progressively *disciplined* into a methodical and sustained attention, whereas “curiosity” proper became increasingly associated with a fleeting and distracting curiosity which was not only the hallmark of the masses, but also of the dilettantish *curieux* and the collectors of curiosities. As a result, the term “curiosity” was to designate more and more the low form of a desire which an increasingly institutional, professional and specialized pursuit of knowledge took for granted as its own driving force, but also often preferred to ignore, uneasy with the idea that a – by definition – objective and disinterested activity could have an underlying libidinal component.

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By the 19th century, curiosity appears certainly as a minor issue that evokes mostly the theological and philosophical debates of a pre-scientific age. Taken for granted by a triumphant scientism which tends to relegate the use of the term to the harmless and inconsequential activities of the amateur and the collector, curiosity only retains some of its hubristic connotations in Romantic literary portrayals such as Goethe’s *Faust* or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which should not be read as necessarily obscurantist, but as pointing to the disquieting aspects of the modern pursuit of knowledge on which the Enlightenment had placed an absolute faith. Yet, to a certain extent, all these portrayals of a dangerous and transgressive curiosity seem anachronistic in light of the reality of the modern pursuit of knowledge whose “functionaries” are enlisted in an increasingly institutional and professional activity.

One of the best examples of the tensions between all the contradictory strands of meaning in this age-old motif can be found in Flaubert’s belated, anachronistic yet startlingly relevant and modern tale of curiosity, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Reading Flaubert’s last novel as a tale of curiosity is hermeneutically justified not only because curiosity is the true leitmotif – also in the literal sense of being the narrative’s driving force – of this strange “novel”, but also because it illuminates its epistemological dimension. In particular, it reveals the profound connection in modernity between a sublimated theoretical curiosity and a base, fetishist curiosity. The connection between these two antithetical curiosities is radically and irreducibly ambivalent. For, *Bouvard* can, on the one hand, be read as a narrative of education – literally, a *Bildungsroman* –, recounting the sublimation of an alienating, low curiosity into an emancipating, “higher” theoretical curiosity; but, on the other hand, by assimilating this sublimation to a process of disciplinarization, Flaubert’s novel also point to an opposite and disquieting relationship between

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20 Henceforth, Flaubert’s novel will be designated as *Bouvard*. 
our two curiosities, between what have increasingly become the “self-disciplined activity” of the pursuit of knowledge, on the one hand, and a “self-dissipating passivity”, on the other hand. It now appears that the zealous, almost ascetic, desire to know of those professionals embarked in the modern disciplinary pursuit of knowledge is subjected to an autonomous, demonic machine, constantly producing new knowledge, and has engendered as its counterpart a disruptive, dissipating curiosity, which increasingly takes the form of a consuming – and consumerist – desire for the new (Neugier)\textsuperscript{21}. In the end, as a novel of curiosity, Bouvard is also about literature’s own contradictory position within culture: supreme recapitulatory site of culture, crown of Science, or mere marginal curiosity, unacknowledged and repressed leftover in the fringes of culture, by-product of the relentless march forward of the machine of Science.

1 Curiosity engenders curiosities

There is something inexplicable and somehow gratuitous in Bouvard and Pécuchet’s explosion of curiosity at the beginning of the novel, especially compared to the original anecdote which was one of Flaubert’s main sources of inspiration for the plot of his novel. Published in 1841 in La Gazette des tribunaux by a certain B. Maurice, Les deux greffiers is a brief fictional anecdote about two copyists who entertain the dream of eventually retiring to the countryside to spend their last years living a life of leisure, hunting and fishing. In the end, Maurice’s two clerks do move to the countryside, but after a while they find their new life dull and boring and decide to become copyists once more, this time as a pastime. Bouvard tells essentially the same story; however, Flaubert manages to interpolate – in what for Maurice is a mere rustic interlude in the life of two copyists – a full-fledged encyclopaedic odyssey. Compared to Maurice’s short story,

\textsuperscript{21} These two curiosities seem to have been finally reconciled in modern technoscience, where a productive curiosity is constantly feeding a greedy Neugier.
Bouvard and Pécuchet’s initial burst of curiosity is all the more striking: Instead of fading away in the autumn of a life devoted to a monotonous, stultifying routine occupation, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s belated curiosity is surprisingly ignited, and maintained to the extent of sustaining their true encyclopaedic journey.

Rather than of a thirst for knowledge, we should speak of a greedy gargantuan appetite – as Pierre Assoun remarks in “L’ignorance passionnée. Bouvard et Pécuchet saisis par la psychoanalyse”: “[C]’est avec cet appétit pantagruélique partagé qu’ils vont se jeter sur les mets du savoir” (104) (“it is with a shared gargantuan appetite that they will devour the delicacies of knowledge”) (my translation). Yet, they are certainly not Rabelaisian giants: nothing they read is assimilated or incorporated; they remain two indigested and puffed up dwarves who deflate in an unrestrained logorrhoea. Rather than appeasing their hunger, an indigestible knowledge stimulates their greediness. In one the many banquets of the novel, which confer an undeniable Menippean flavour to Bouvard, the atmosphere depicted could not be less “convivial”:

Et pendant que les plats se succédaient, poule au jus, écrevisses, champignons, légumes en salade, rôtis d’alouettes, bien des sujets furent traités: le meilleur système d’impôts, les avantages de la grande culture, l’abolition de la peine de mort -- le sous-préfet n’oublia pas de citer ce mot charmant d’un homme d’esprit: -- Que MM. les assassins commencent!

Bouvard était surpris par le contraste des choses qui l’entouraient avec celles que l’on disait -- car il semble toujours que les paroles doivent correspondre aux milieux, et que les hauts plafonds soient faits pour les grandes pensées. Néanmoins, il était rouge au dessert, et entrevoyait les compotiers dans un brouillard. (250)

22 In his Anatomy of criticism, Northrop Frye already noticed that Flaubert’s apparently unclassifiable “novel” shared an air de famille with the Menippean satire.
And whilst the dishes followed one another—fowl with gravy, lobsters, mushrooms, salads, roast larks—many topics were handled: the best system of taxation, the advantages of the large system of land cultivation, the abolition of the death penalty. The sub-prefect did not forget to cite that charming witticism of a clever man: “Let Messieurs the Assassins begin!”

Bouvard was astonished at the contrast between the surroundings and the remarks that reached his ears; for one would think that the language used should always harmonise with the environment, and that lofty ceilings should be made for great thoughts. (217)

The indigestible nature of all what is being served at dinner contrasts with insubstantiality of all the common-places and general digestibility of what is being said. While Rabelais’s advice was to imitate the dog – according to Rabelais, the most philosophical of all animals – which plays with a bone before cracking it open to find inside a nutritive “substantial marrow”, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s bulimic desire to know is reminiscent to the ravenous and omnivorous appetite of the pig in Flaubert’s La Tentation de Saint Antoine which, according to Pierre Macherey, “par sa bestialité, atteint une sorte d’absolu: il finit par embrasser le réel en totalité, encyclopédiquement” (168) (“Because of its bestiality, the boundless appetite of the pig achieves a sort of absolute: it eventually embraces the whole of the real, encyclopedically; 187). Incapable of finding any “substantial marrow”, Bouvard and Pécuchet consume everything in their way indiscriminately. Their consumption acquires consumerist overtones. Indeed, in La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne, Henri Lefebvre saw in Bouvard a novel about consumption: “un cauchemar, la consommation librement obligatoire de la culture” (257) (“a nightmare of self-imposed cultural consumption”; 137): Flaubert’s two dilettantes “vont consommer de l’œuvre, de la culture, toute la culture. Tous les livres” (257) (“consume works of art, culture, the whole culture, all the books”; 137) as they squander Bouvard’s inheritance to make their whole encyclopaedic journey possible.
By sinking their teeth into every single book that comes their way, Bouvard and Pécuchet are ultimately trying to crack the world’s mystery, to understand it, and, in a way, to assimilate and “incorporate” it. And this, even though their curiosity is above all a bookish curiosity. Yet, in its materiality, the book confers a physical, assimilable and consumable, form to the world, conceived of as the “book of Nature”. But it also speaks to language’s capacity to bind the world through symbols. As Stathis Gourgouris puts it in Does Literature Think: Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era, “[l]ike some dual Adam, naming and renaming objects, notions and events” (Gourgouris 239), Bouvard and Pécuchet attempt to take possession of the world through language and also by seeking the hidden “principes”, “préceptes”, “la règle” (99) (“principles”, “precepts”, “the rule”) of Nature. Materialization of their systematic monomania, their garden, their laboratory, their museum and finally their encyclopaedia bear witness to their hubristic appetite to know, to embrace and incorporate the world.

This bulimic appetite which seeks to leave no leftover inevitably engenders a residue, monstrous, inassimilable, which whets in turn their renewed appetite. In other words, the indigestible wonder, the curious thing that elicits admiration and sparks curiosity can also be the product of that very same curiosity, thus generating an endless repetitive and compulsive cycle where curiosities elicit a curiosity which, in its systematizing drive, gives rise to a monstrous remainder. There is a passage towards the beginning of the novel that illustrates this phenomenon:

La majesté de la création leur causa un ébahissement, infini comme elle. Leur tête s’élargissait. Ils étaient fiers de réfléchir sur de si grands objets.

Les minéraux ne tardèrent pas à les fatiguer; -- et ils recoururent comme distraction, aux Harmonies de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Harmonies végétales et terrestres, aériennes, aquatiques, humaines, fraternelles et même conjugales, tout y passa – sans omettre les invocations à Vénus, aux Zéphrys et aux
Amours! Ils s’étonnaient que les poissons eussent des nageoires, les oiseaux des ailes, les semences une enveloppe – pleins de cette philosophie qui découvre dans la Nature des intentions vertueuses et la considère comme une espèce de saint Vincent de Paul, toujours occupé à répandre des bienfaits!

Ils admirèrent ensuite ses prodiges, les trombes, les volcans, les forêts vierges; -- et ils achetèrent l’ouvrage de M. Depping sur les *Merveilles* et beautés de la nature en France. Le Cantal en possède trois, l’Hérault cinq, la Bourgogne deux – pas davantage – tandis que le Dauphiné compte à lui seul jusqu’à quinze merveilles! Mais bientôt, on n’en trouvera plus! Les grottes à stalactites se bouchent, les montagnes ardentees s’éteignent, les glaciers naturels s’échauffent; – et les vieux arbres dans lesquels on disait la messe tombent sous la cognée des nivelleurs, ou sont en train de mourir.

Puis leur curiosité se tourna vers les bêtes.

Ils rouvrèrent leur Buffon et s’extasient devant les goûts bizarres de certains animaux. Mais tous les livres ne valant pas une observation personnelle, ils entraient dans les cours, et demandaient aux laboureurs s’ils avaient vu des taureaux se joindre à des juments, les cochons rechercher les vaches, et les mâles des perdrix commettre entre eux des turpitudes.

- Jamais de la vie! On trouvait même ces questions un peu drôles pour des messieurs de leur âge.

The majesty of creation engendered in them an amazement infinite as itself. Their heads got enlarged. They were proud of reflecting on such lofty themes.

The minerals ere long proved wearisome to them, and for distraction they sought refuge in the *Harmonies* of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Vegetable and terrestrial harmonies, aërial, aquatic, human, fraternal, and even conjugal—every one of them is here dealt with, not omitting the invocations to Venus, to the Zephyrs, and to the Loves. They exhibited astonishment at fishes having fins, birds wings, seeds an envelope; full of that philosophy which discovers virtuous intentions in Nature, and regards her as a kind of St. Vincent de Paul, always occupied in performing acts of benevolence.
Then they wondered at her prodigies, the water-spouts, the volcanoes, the virgin forests; and they bought M. Depping’s work on the *Marvels and Beauties of Nature in France*. Cantal possesses three of them, Hérault five, Burgundy two—no more, while Dauphiné reckons for itself alone up to fifteen marvels. But soon we shall find no more of them. The grottoes with stalactites are stopped up; the burning mountains are extinguished; the natural ice-houses have become heated; and the old trees in which they said mass are falling under the leveller's axe, or are on the point of dying.

Their curiosity next turned towards the beasts.

They re-opened their Buffon, and got into ecstasies over the strange tastes of certain animals.

But all the books are not worth one personal observation. They hurried out into the farmyard, and asked the labourers whether they had seen bulls consorting with mares, hogs seeking after cows, and the males of partridges doing strange things among themselves.

“Never in their lives.” They thought such questions even a little queer for gentlemen of their age. (97-98)

Before the infinite multiplicity of the world of particulars, Bouvard et Pécuchet are constantly ébahis, étonnés, en admiration. Far from eliciting a “good” curiosity or desire to know, this sense of Wonder arouses an Augustian *curiositas*, lust of the eyes seeking constant stimulation in novelty. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s attention is ensnared by the wonder-ful – “alliances anormales” – and the bizarre – “goût bizarres de certains animaux” (140). As Daston and Park remark, after being temporally rehabilitated by a nascent modern science, wonders were after the 18th century regarded as epistemological obstacles. Bachelard notes in *La Formation de l’esprit scientifique*, “[e]n donnant une satisfaction immédiate à la curiosité, en multipliant les occasions de la curiosité, loin de favoriser la culture scientifique, on l’entrave. On remplace la connaissance par l’admiration, les idées par les images” (29) “by giving immediate satisfaction to curiosity and by multiplying the opportunities for curiosity, far from encouraging scientific culture we hinder it. We replace knowledge by wonderment and ideas by images” (38). In *Bouvard*, we witness an
unstoppable proliferation of the imaginary. As this passage bears out, Bouvard et Pécuchet’s curiosity does not start from the world, it is mediated by books and triggered by them. The sense of wonder of our two protagonists stems from their readings – Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, Bouffon, etc. In a similar vein, Sartre confesses in Les mots that, as a child, his first encounter with fauna and flora was through the Larousse encyclopaedia:


[T]he apes in the zoo were less apes, the people less people in the Luxembourg Gardens were less people. Like Plato, I passed from knowledge to its subject. I found more reality in the idea than in the thing because it was given to me first and because it was given as a thing. It was in books that I encountered the universe: digested, classified, labelled, meditated, still formidable. (10)

Like the young Sartre, the middle-aged Bouvard and Pécuchet are consumed by a similar bookish curiosity. Yet, and this is crucial, while this curiosity tends to soften the edges of “things” and make them more digestible, it has also the opposite effect. After asking the farmers about “alliances anormales”, driven by their curiosity, our two heroes try to produce their own monsters: “Ils renouvelèrent leurs tentatives sur des poules et un canard, sur un dogue et une truie, avec l’espoir qu’il en sortirait des monstres et ne comprenant rien à la question de l’espèce” (141) (“They renewed their experiments on hens and a drake, on a mastiff and a sow, in the hope that monsters might be the result, not understanding anything about the question of species”; 99). Tamed and confined within the boundaries of a classification or a system – and its
materializations, the garden, the laboratory, the library – Nature and the world do not only docilely submit; on the contrary, they tend to resurface abruptly in the form of contingent, monstrous “by-products”.

For Pierre Macheray, the pig of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* perfectly embodies this double movement of “absorption” and “expulsion” of the world. In fact, the pig stands as a metaphor for the writer whose desire to appropriate the world\(^{23}\) is inseparable from its ulterior “restitution”. Artistic creation, “parodie de geste divin” (172) (“parody of the divine gesture”; 204), is a double process: “Écrire, c’est assimiler le réel pour le métamorphoser, suivant un rapport complexe d’échange, successivement attractif et répulsif” (“To write is to assimilate the real in order to metamorphose it through a complex relation of exchange which alternates between attraction and repulsion”; 199). We find here the interplay between desire and hate, absorption and expulsion which Freud sees at the origin of the act of positing an external world\(^{24}\). We are not far from that impossible Real which Lacan places both at the onset and at the outset – both substratum and product – of the symbolic process. Curiosities elicit curiosity just as much as curiosity engenders curiosities.

Macheray defends Flaubert’s “irréalisme” (“non-realism”) arguing that “contrairement à l’interprétation qui en été le plus souvent donnée, l’œuvre de Flaubert se situe aux antipodes d’un ‘réalisme’” (155) (“Contrary to the usual interpretations, Flaubert’s œuvre is the antithesis of a ‘realism’”; 178). Flaubert’s encyclopaedic novel is a book about everything, and, in that respect, indistinguishable from that book about nothing which Flaubert hankered for. Rather than seeing

\(^{23}\) “For him the world is not merely a spectacle, but also a store-house of raw materials and foodstuffs on which he can draw indefinitely in order to satisfy his voracity” (Macherey 197).

\(^{24}\) See for instance Freud’s essay “Die Verneinung” (“Negation”).
the anti-realism of Flaubert in isolation, one should, like Christopher Prendergast, regard Flaubert’s realism and anti-realism as part of an irreducible dialectic. Prendergast’s insightful analysis on the radical ambivalence of the “lieu commun” is particularly relevant: “On the other hand, in a basic but strong sense, the lieu commun may be the indispensable place in which ‘individuals’ assemble as in a commonplace; and the ironic knowingness which would transcend it may well entail a blindness to what are fundamental forms of (common) knowledge” (216). Just as the Flaubert’s lieu commun should be read in these two incompatible ways, Bouvard should similarly be read as both an enlightened praise of curiosity seeking to pierce through the idols of the tribe, as well as a cautionary tale of curiosity, the satirical narrative of a dazzling enlightenment inevitably involving a certain form of blindness.

1.1 The Museum

In his article “The Museum Furnace”, Eugenio Donato proposes the Museum as the fundamental metaphor for Bouvard and Péchuchet’s “search for an encyclopaedic totality” (220). In chapter 4 of Bouvard, the two protagonists become collectors of curiosities and create their own Museum at home. Their country house is invaded by a heterogeneous bric-a-brac of natural and historical “curiosities”. For Donato, there is an irresolvable tension underlying the Museum:

The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe […] [S]hould the fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the Museum but bric-a-brac a heap of meaninglessness and valueless fragments of objects which are incapable of substituting themselves either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations. (223)

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25 In The Order of Mimesis, Prendergast argues that any anti-mimetic reading presupposed a mimetic reading.
Rather than a *speculum mundi*, a faithful representation of an orderly universe, the Museum turns out to be in the end a chaotic *cabinet de curiosités*; as a result, for Donato, Flaubert is “an epistemological nihilist” (228) whose satirical novel bears witness to the “failure of the epistemology of the Museum to offer an adequate continuous representation between Words and Things” (228).

The main problem with Donato’s analysis is that it fails to acknowledge that the realm of “Things” is not merely a removed sphere from which Bouvard and Pécuchet are fundamentally alienated submerged as they are in the world of the word. Donato ignores the underlying libidinal economy of the Museum: for, the more Things appear distant and veiled, the more they are invested – and therefore mediated – by the desire of the two heroes. The “curiosities” of the Museum are above all “objects of desire”. The Things-themselves might be “irrepresentable”, as Donato points out; yet, the “things” encountered by Bouvard and Pécuchet are already mediated by desire, invested with their own desire (to know). In other words, it is their “curiosity” which produces “curiosities”. We are confronted here with an exacerbated form of the very dialectic built into the old motif of “curiosity”, a dialectic between the desire to impose an overarching order and the very object which eludes that desire – the *curiosité* – transformed, as a result, into an object of desire.

In *Literature and material culture from Balzac to Proust*, Janell Watson takes aims precisely at Donato for overlooking the fundamental material and “artifactual” nature of the Museum:

Unlike the textual space of the encyclopaedia, then, the museum is primarily artifactual, both literally and conceptually. Though the encyclopaedia is of course material and while the museum is certainly subject to linguistic order, the crucial difference between the
textual nature of the encyclopaedia and the artifactual nature of the museum has too long been overlooked as a result of critical theory’s linguistic-oriented phases of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and semiotic postmodernism. (86)

Watson ascribes the heterogeneous array of objects in Bouvard and Pécuchet’s Museum to a category of objects emblematic of the 19th century, the *bibelot*, rather than to the *curiosité* which enjoyed its heyday in the previous centuries. By using “bibelot” to refer to the artifacts in the museum collection”, Flaubert is “signaling that they belong not only to the sphere of erudition, but also to the sphere of domesticity” (84). More generally, this means that Bouvard and Pécuchet’s objects of knowledge cannot be simply considered on a purely epistemological level; they are “objects of desire”:

[T]he order of artifacts never really manages to escape the vulgarity and domesticity of the objects of daily life. To relegate the museum to the realm of Knowledge, even while proclaiming its fundamental failure, as do Donato and others, is to fail to recognize that museum is merely one “system of objects” among others, that objects of knowledge are as subject to the libidinal logic of desire co-opted by consumer capitalism, as they are to the (failed) logic of Reason. (90)

Watson concludes that “the object of knowledge is not so easily disentangled from the object of consumption.” (108). As she points out, her analysis does not so much invalidate Donato’s as it completes it by paying attention to a complementary dimension too often ignored26. By focusing only on the epistemological dimension, “the commodification of knowledge exposed by Flaubert’s novel” (105) has been overlooked. Particularly interesting in Watson’s analysis is her emphasis on the “sphere of domesticity”. In “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian”, Walter

26 “The critics of Bouvard remind us that the museum is indebted to the culture of the encyclopaedia. It is time we recognized that the museum is equally indebted to the culture of the marketplace. The object of knowledge is not so easily disentangled from the object of consumption.” (108)
Benjamin characterizes the collector as motivated by “gefährlichen, wenn auch domestizierten Passionen” (490) (“dangerous though domesticated passions”; 241) Bouvard and Pécuchet’s domesticated, bourgeois, curiosity has certainly little to do with the hubris of Renaissance curiositas – even though, as we will see, there is something demonic at work in their repetitive, compulsive, quest for Truth. The object of their “domesticated” curiosity is to collect curiosities for their museum as much as to furnish the living room of their intellect. This is what makes Bouvard et Pécuchet an anti-Bildungsroman evidencing the commodification and privatisation – domestication in its etymological sense – of the Enlightenment’s ideal of Bildung. In modernity, Augustine’s dispersing and distracting curiositas has metamorphosed into a greedy and consumerist Neugier.

2 Belated curiosity

The figure of the collector deserves closer attention. His curiosity is not only an idle curiosity lost in particulars; in fact, as Benjamin insightfully remarks, “das Dasein des Sammlers [ist] dialektisch gespannt zwischen den Polen der Unordnung und der Ordnung” (“Bibliothek” 389) (“the life of a collector manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order”; “Unpacking” 487). A similar tension can be found in Bouvard and Pécuchet, whose proverbial “lack of Method”27 consists precisely in their inability to bridge the two poles. Bouvard and Pécuchet turn out to be caricatures of the psychology of the collector described by Baudrillard in the Le système des objets; according to him, collecting provides a compensation for sexuality by staging a regression to the anal stage “qui se traduit par des conduits d’accumulation, d’ordre, de retention aggressive, etc.” (123) (“characterized by accumulation,
orderliness, aggressive retention, and so on; 87): “C’est chez l’enfant le mode le plus rudimentaire de maîtrise du monde extérieur: rangement, classement, manipulation” (123) (“For children, collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating”; 87); similarly, for Bouvard and Pécuchet, collecting is a metaphor for their encyclopaedic project: labelling and cataloguing are the no less obsessive counterpart of their greed for curiosités – during the Agricultural episode, Pécuchet is described as doing just that: “il passait là des heures délicieuses à éplucher les graines, à écrire des étiquettes, à mettre en ordre ses petits pots” (85) “[Pécuchet] spent delightful hours there picking the berries, writing labels, and putting his little pots in order; 39).

At the beginning of Les deux greffiers, Maurice announces the moral of his short story:

Sans doute le proverbe a raison: ‘il faut garder une poire pour la soif’; mais, s’il ne dépend pas de nous de prolonger cette dernière, ne vaudrait-il pas mieux manger la poire tandis qu’elle n’est mûre encore, plutôt que de la conserver blette pour le temps où la soif nous aura quittés (558)

The proverb is probably right: “one should keep a pear for thirst”; but, since it is beyond our power to prolong the latter, would it not be better to eat the pear while it is still ripe, rather than to keep it overripe for when we no longer feel thirsty? (my translation)

Yet, against all odds and unlike Maurice’s two clerks, Flaubert two middle-aged copyists are overcome by an unexpected thirst for knowledge. A belated desire for knowledge which ironically takes the form of the caricatural regressive (childish) curiosity described by Baudrillard. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s belated curiosity is therefore not only childish and regressive, but ultimately anachronistic. Like 17th century curieux, Bouvard and Pecuchet showcase that particular blend of naïve, chaotic curiosity and systematizing dogmatism which both sparked the Scientific Revolution and hampered it. In La Formation de l’Esprit Scientifique,
Gaston Bachelard ranks “l’attrait du singulier et l’attrait de l’universel” (60) (“the attraction of the singular and that of the universal”; 69) as the two foremost “epistemological obstacles” that stand in the way of a budding “scientific mind”. Interestingly, in classical psychoanalytical way, the title of Bachelard’s *La Formation de l’Esprit Scientifique* refers to a double “formation”: “le développement historique de la pensée scientifique et dans la pratique de l’éducation” (“historical development of scientific thought and also in educational practice”; 27). In this respect, *Bouvard* recounts the historical and developmental regression of two autodidacts to the times when a nascent Science was pulled apart between the lure of the particular and the attraction of the universal.

In a classical psychoanalytic way, the “formation” of the title should be read as referring both to the history of science and to the formation of the individual “scientific spirit”. According to Bachelard, the first two stages of the “formation” of the scientific spirit are:

**Âme puérile ou mondaine**, animée par la curiosité naïve, frappée d’étonnement devant la moindre phénomène instrumenté, jouant à la Physique pour se distraire, pour avoir un prétexte à une attitude sérieuse, accueillant les occasions du collectionneur, passive jusque dans le bonheur de penser.

**Âme professorale**, toute fière de son dogmatisme, immobile dans sa première abstraction, appuyée pour la vie sur les succès scolaires de sa jeunesse, parlant chaque année son savoir, imposant ses démonstrations, tout à l’intérêt déductif, soutien si commode de l’autorité. (9)

First, there is the puerile, childlike soul, the modish, dilettante soul, filled with naive curiosity and marvelling at any phenomenon instruments produce, playing at physics for amusement and as an excuse for adopting a serious attitude, happily collecting things that come its way and remaining passive even in the joy of thinking.
Next, there is the teacherly soul, proud of its dogmatism and fixed in its first abstraction, resting throughout its life on the laurels of its schooldays, its knowledge spoken out loud every year, imposing its proofs on others and wholly devoted to that deduction which so conveniently bolsters authority. (21)

These two stages lead to a true Hegelian sublation: “L’âme en mal d’abstraire et de quintessencier, conscience scientifique douloureuse … jouant le jeu périlleux de la pensée sans support expérimental stable” (9) (“the soul desperate to abstract and reach the quintessential, a suffering scientific consciousness … playing the dangerous game of thought that has no stable experimental support”; 21). Because of their lack of method, Bouvard and Pécuchet are incapable of attaining this third superseding stage and seem condemned to oscillate between the two first stages. As Bachelard observes, epistemological obstacles come in pairs leaving “la pensée empirique dans une oscillation pleine de saccades et de tiraillements” (20) (“empirical thought oscillating in fits and starts”; 30). Bouvard and Pécuchet are violently torn between, on the one hand, the childish curiosity of the “âme puerile”, in awe before the spectacle of the world, constantly in need to be entertained and seeking the thrill of new, the rare or the monstrous; and, on the other hand, “l’esprit de système” of aspiring professors in awe before the authorities in the field and condemned to parrot the Voice of Science. In other words, Bouvard and Pécuchet are incapable of bridging between particulars and universals and succumb successively to their respective spells. Bachelard characterizes this inescapable alternative between a naive empiricism and absolute universal claims as follows: “De l’observation au système on va ainsi des yeux ébahis aux yeux fermés.” (20) (“when we go from observation to system, we go from having our eyes wide with wonder to having them tightly shut”; 30). We have here the motif of the dazzling, the “Blendung” of our next chapter, involving both a dazzling and a blinding. Rather than the “formation” of a scientific spirit, Bouvard tells the story of a regression, an “involution”, a true process of “malformation” of two autodidacts, parody of
the *roman de formation* or *Bildungsroman*. In a sense, Bouvard and Pécuchet are no less monstrous than the reality with which they try to get to terms. The story of two retired autodidacts who move to the countryside makes for a grotesque “coming-of-age story”. As a narrative of a failed education, *Bouvard* seems to announce Weinstein’s Modernist novels about “unknowing” in which the Realist “enlightenment narrative” of education is subverted. As much as this is true, *Bouvard* simultaneously exhibits one of the fundamental features of the “enlightenment narrative”, an “apparent self-loss (wandering through space and time)” which turns out to be “a self-recovery” (46). Weinstein quotes Levinas, in a passage which, ironically, applies to our two heroes:

> It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to possess itself... The detour ... leads to coinciding with oneself, that is, to certainty, which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of being. But this is why this adventure is not adventure. It is never dangerous; It is self-possession, sovereignty. (qtd in 46)

In this sense, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s journey is certainly no adventure; their detour also leads back to themselves; however, instead of the self-possessed, sovereign “subject of the Enlightenment”, we have a radically ambivalent, self-possessed but empty, “subject of the Copy”, which points to Lacan’s conception of the subject as a fundamental lack which the two protagonists finally come to recognize as constitutive.

*Bouvard* could also be read as belonging to the critical – Modernist – stage of this quintessential 19th century bourgeois literary genre, the *Bildungsroman*. According to Gregory Castle in *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, “the critique of Bildung is part of a general modernist project of recuperation and revision of the Enlightenment concept of aesthetico-spiritual Bildung, which had been rationalized and bureaucratized in the course of the nineteenth
century” (1). This commodification of an Enlightenment ideal can be already be detected in Flaubert’s own description of the novel as a “farical encyclopaedia”. If the 18th century had been the century of the encyclopédisme and the “Encyclopédie”, the 19th century was the century of encyclopedias and dictionaries. By being both a failed encyclopaedic journey for emancipation through Knowledge and the cumbersome monstrous reified product of this journey, Bouvard bears witness to the reification of the Enlightenment ideals.

Yet, as we have said, Bouvard remains, on the surface, a true roman de formation; the novel follows rigorously – and mechanically – a dusty ladder of knowledge, an ascending spiral from the instrumental applied sciences towards increasingly “purer” and more disinterested forms of knowledge, culminating in philosophy, metaphysics and theology. At the beginning of their quest, the two protagonists’ desire to know is “impure”, contaminated by other desires, among which a barely contained libido dominandi, desire for control and mastery. It is to manage their state that Bouvard and Pécuchet decide to study Agronomy, unwittingly launching their encyclopaedic journey; after their initial failures, they turn to Arboriculture as an investment (“spéculation”). Later on, they conduct chemical experiments to develop the “bouvarine”, because they dream to become rich and famous. In their laboratory, they show no scruples when using the poor and the homeless in their medical experiments. For them, libido scienti and libido dominandi seem to go hand in hand in a hubristic way that is reminiscent of the unchecked libido of Faustian Magic or Baconian science. However, Bouvard and Pécuchet will eventually seek knowledge for its own sake. It is when they turn to History that, as Bourdieu would put it, they become first interested in disinterested knowledge. The passage that marks this transition is one of the most quoted in the novel, one of the few in which Flaubert is seen as empathizing with his two “idiots”: “Mais le goût de l’Histoire leur était venu, le besoin de la
vérité pour elle-même” (188) (“But the taste for history had come to them, the need of truth for its own sake”; 150).

This purifying of the desire to know into a pure “love for Truth” is precisely the stated purpose of Bachelard’s *La Formation de l’Esprit Scientifique* (*The Formation of the Scientific Mind*) – whose subtitle is *Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective* (*A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge*). Bachelard seeks to “psychoanalyser l’intérêt, ruiner tout utilitarisme si déguisé qu’il soit” (10) (“psychoanalyse interest, to destroy all utilitarianism, however disguised its form and lofty the status it claims”; 21). By ruining all the traces of contaminating interests and desires, a disinterested love of Truth can finally see the light. We do not find in Bachelard the asceticism Nietzsche saw in the modern pursuit of knowledge; he thinks of his *Formation* as an “apology” or defence of “le plaisir de l’excitation spirituelle dans la découverte du vrai” (10) (“the pleasure of mental stimulation in the discovery of truth”; 21); only then, the love of Truth will become a “dynamisme psychique autogène” (10) (autogenous psychic dynamism”; 21). The pleasure associated with this “autogenous psychic dynamism” evokes Lacanian *jouissance* and drive. *Bouvard* precisely explores the irreducible tensions between this compulsive, ultimately meaningless, drive for knowledge, divorced from any other human concerns or interests, and a burning desire for a more human, meaningful Truth.

3 Between drive for knowledge and desire for truth

*Bouvard* and Pécuuchet’s unexpected burst of curiosity late in their life is not only bewilderingly belated and anachronistic, it is also strangely exclusivist. There is something naively comical in the way the mid-life crisis of two bachelors leading a tedious existence as office clerks is simply resolved through an absolute – monomaniac – investment in a purely cognitive enterprise. In their saintly *bêtise*, somewhere in between the Faustian “arme Tor” and
the Wagnerian “reine Tor” (Parsifal), Flaubert’s two modern day copyists-monks are
(caricatural) embodiments of a sublimated libido. In his essay devoted to Leonardo da Vinci,
Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci, Freud notes “das Zusammentreffen des
übermächtigen Forschertriebes bei Leonardo mit der Verkümmerung seines Sexuallebens ... welches sich auf sogennante ideelle [sublimierte] Homosexualität einschränkt” (107) (“the concurrence in Leonardo of his over-powerful instinct for research and the atrophy of his sexual life ... which was restricted to what is called ideal [sublimated] homosexuality”; 30). This
“atrophy” is considered by Freud as not necessarily pathological or neurotic, yet “[a]uch hier
wird das Forschen gewissermaßen zum Zwang und zum Ersatz der Sexualbetätigung” (106)
(“the research becomes to some extent compulsive and a substitute for sexual activity; 29).
Indeed, Freud portrays Leonardo as a sort of patron saint of a Science regarded as a
fundamentally ascetic endeavour. Bouvard and Pécuchet perfectly fit in this archetypical
portrayal of the “urge to know”: their intellectual journey has an undeniable compulsive element
and the novel only leaves room for some sentimental subplots and very minor love interests,
other than the profound friendship between the two protagonists, true complementary soul mates
whose initial encounter reads like a romantic coup de foudre. Despite their shared passion for
one another and for knowledge, the sexual life of these two middle-aged men is somewhat
“atrophied”; Bouvard was once married and has more experience with women than Pécuchet,
shy, prudish and still a virgin. The irony here is that what makes them resemble Leonardo, patron
saint of disinterested Science, is also what makes them perfect copyists: no less as copyists than
as curieux, they are models of sublimation. Freud defines sublimation as the capability of “ganz
ansehnliche Anteile ihrer sexuellen Triebkräfte auf ihre Berufstätigkeit zu leiten” (104)
(“directing very considerable portions of their sexual instinctual forces to their professional
activity”; 26). Seen in terms of sublimation, curiosity truly becomes a Wissbegierde, a blind
instinct; blind not only because it is a compulsive drive but also because it is blind to its own libidinal origin in “infantile sexual curiosity”; its blindness turns out to be the very condition of its functioning. If in Leonardo, Freud is evoking that nascent demonic Wissbegierde which launched the modern “machine” of Science, three centuries later, Bouvard and Pécuchet appear as the symptoms of its progressive professionalization and institutionalization.

At first sight, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s desire to know is very much in the spirit of the century. The 19th century is the century of the Faustian man, driven by an all-encompassing desire, and the Balzacian hero, possessed by an obsessive idée fixe. In Reading for the plot, Richard Brooks evokes “the ambitious heroes of the nineteenth century novel … true ‘desiring machines’ whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon” (39-40). Rather than machines, these heroes are motors, “containing its source of movement within itself” (41). In Bouvard, desire is certainly not only “the motor force of the narrative but […] the very motive of narrative” (48). Yet, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s obsessive desire for knowledge is both strangely exclusivist and ludicrously all-embracing. The quest for Knowledge of these two mediocre bourgeois offers more than a mere satire of the ambitions of the century; it is a vivid – and somehow tragic – account of the alienating power of desire; alienating because seemingly alien to the protagonists themselves, who appear to be possessed by an autonomous drive. According to Brooks, the ambition of 19th century novelistic heroes “is inherently totalizing, figuring the self’s tendency to appropriation and aggrandizement, moving forward through the encompassment of more, striving to have, to do, and to be more” (Brooks 38). Bouvard brings this logic to its paradoxical reversal: Bouvard and Pécuchet are literally devoured, consumed by an alien and alienating drive, the drive of an ever-growing machine of Science.
In *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Hans Blumenberg remarks how the rehabilitation of theoretical curiosity during the Renaissance cannot be considered a return to the Ancient theoretical ideal. An accumulated energy is liberated in Renaissance’s hubristic and boundless curiosity. As Nietzsche insightfully observes in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*:

Die lange Unfreiheit des Geistes, der mißtrauische Zwang in der Mitteilbarkeit der Gedanken, die Zucht, welche sich der Denker auferlegte, innerhalb einer kirchlichen und höfischen Richtschnur oder unter aristotelischen Voraussetzungen zu denken, der lange geistige Wille, alles, was geschieht, nach einem christlichen Schema auszulegen und den christlichen Gott noch in jedem Zufalle wieder zu endecken und zu rechtferigen, - all dies Gewaltsame, Willkürliche, Harte, Schauerliche, Widervernunftige hat sich als das Mittel herausgestellt, durch welches dem europäischen Geiste seine Stärke, seine rücksichtslose Neugierde une feine Beweglichkeit angezüchtet wurde. (68)

The long unfreedom of the spirit, the mistrustful constraint in the communicability of thoughts, the discipline thinkers imposed on themselves to think within directions laid down by a church or court, or under Aristotelian presuppositions, the long spiritual will to interpret all events under a Christian schema and to rediscover and justify the Christian God in every accident – all this, however forced, capricious, hard, gruesome, and antirational, has shown itself to be the means through which the European spirit has been trained to strength, ruthless curiosity, and subtle mobility. (101)

Marlowe’s Faust is the paradigm of this Renaissance “rücksichtslose Neugierde”, which has retained the sinful associations of *curiositas*. Faust’s curiosity is the hubristic desire of an inflated ego – “O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence / is promised to the studious artisan!” (50-55). Yet, it is Mephistopheles who incarnates the alien(ating) demonic drive of knowledge. He personifies a voracious nascent modern science, a science which will make Brecht’s Galileo exclaim: “Herr, meine Wissenschaft ist noch wissbegierig” (qtd. in Blumenberg 463) (“Sir, my science is still greedy for knowledge!; 395). As
Blumenberg notes, with Galileo already, “Die Neugierde hat nicht nur aufgehört, eines der Laster des erlösungsbedürftigen Individuums sein zu können, sondern sie hat sich von der Personalstruktur, von den psychischen Unruhe des wissenschaftlichen Prozesses selbst geworden” (464) (“curiosity is no longer able to be one of the vices of the individual in need of redemption; it has already separated itself from the structure of personality, from the psychic motive forces, and has become the mark of the hectic unrest of the scientific process itself; 396).

Often regarded as the incarnation of modern technoscience’s hubristic mastery over the world, Faust also embodies the mastery of the machine of Science over the individual.²⁸

Rather than with a desire to know, we are confronted here with a compulsive epistemological drive that evokes the Freudian and Lacanian death drive, especially as described by Slavoj Žižek in The Plague of Fantasies: “the unconditional impetus which disregards the proper needs of the living body and simply battens on it” (Fantasy 31). At the beginning of the tragedy, Faust’s studious life is driven by this demonic and alienating drive ultimately indifferent to human needs and happiness. Confronted by “the radical closure of the eternal drive” (Fantasy 31), Faust imagines a transgression, a way out of his Kerker, thus “(mis)perceive[ing] the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire” (32). Mephistopheles is the instrument of Faust’s misperception; in other words, Mephistopheles appears as the Other holding the Truth and jouissance, thus able to lure Faust into the false opening “involved in the

²⁸ In his introduction to Does Literature Think?, Stathis Gourgouris observes:

Modernity emerges internally divided, conflicted, antagonistic or dialectical […] between two projects: the project of autonomy and the project of mastery. The first consists in the unprecedented desire to break open the epistemic closure that characterizes other social formations: namely to call into question all ‘idols of the tribe’ without exception and beyond all prohibition. […] The second project may be identified as the desire for limitless expansion of rational and technical mastery, for the instrumentalization of the world, for the submission of all things, animate and inanimate, to the power of pure and practical knowledge (xi). Gourgouris sees this split as an “irreducible contradiction”, which constitutes Adorno’s “dialectic of Enlightenment”. While Faust’s incarnation of modern technoscience’s hubristic mastery over the world, Bouvard exposes the fundamental contradiction between these two projects by pointing to another aspect of the project of mastery, namely the mastery of the machine of Science over the two protagonists.
finitude/temporality of the desiring subject” (Fantasy 31). The phantasmic scenarios that Mephistophelis conjures up for Faust are all very theatrical and cinematic; they fulfill the role of “fantasy [as] the very screen that separates desire from drive” (32). Borrowed from Lacan, Žižek’s double parallel opposition of desire/drive and ‘subjectivized’ truth/non-subjectivized knowledge is particularly interesting when applied to Bouvard.

It has often been observed that Bouvard is an overblown inflation of Goethe’s Faust’s opening verses, when from the depths of his Kerker, he bemoans his fate:

Habe nun, ach! Philosophie,
Juristerei und Medizin,
Und leider auch Theologie
Durchaus studiert, mit heißem Bemühn.
Da steh ich nun, ich armer Tor!
Und bin so klug als wie zuvor. (24)

I’ve studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,—
And even, alas! Theology,—
From end to end, with labor keen;
And here, poor fool! with all my lore
I stand, no wiser than before. (25)

While Faust finds, arguably, some way out of his dungeon through Necromancy and his pact with the Devil, Bouvard and Pécuchet, on the contrary, remain two “poor fools” who, despite their efforts, are confined to the intellectual Kerker of the modern encyclopaedia, closed “circle of sciences”. Žižek observes that “[t]he traditional closed universe is [...] in a sense more ‘open’ than the universe of science: it implies the gateway into the indefinite Beyond, while the direct global model of modern science is effectively ‘closed’ – that is to say, it allows for no Beyond.” (Fantasy 160). For the two Flaubertian protagonists there is no way out of the radical closure of
their symbolic Kerker. In their repetitive, almost compulsive and always failed attempts at knowledge, Bouvard and Pécuchet come to embody the other side of the “project of mastery”: the mastery of the machine of Science over them. Although Faust was already possessed by this alienating drive for knowledge, his tragedy is above all a tragedy of finitude, desire and time. Instead, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s unending journey is the tale of a seemingly infinite compulsive drive.

In this respect, Bouvard is rather the logical continuation of Voltaire’s Candide; the “adventures” of the two Flaubertian copyists start off where Candide ended: the garden. There is something paradoxical in Candide’s ending: unlike Ulysses, prototype of Ancient curiositas, Candide’s homecoming after his wanderings is not a return to a contemplative and restful existence in an Edenic Garden. Reacting to Candide’s injunction, “il faut cultiver notre jardin” (234) (“we must cultivate our garden” (167), Pangloss curiously focuses on the “cultiver”: “car quand l’homme fut mis dans le jardín de l’Éden, il y fut mis … pour qu’il travaillât ; ce qui prouve que l’homme n’est pas né pour le repos” (234) (“for when man was first placed in the Garden of Eden, he was put there … that he might cultivate it ; which shows that man was not born to be idle”; 167). And, Martin adds: “Travaillons sans raisonner […] c’est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable” (234) (“Let us work … without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable”; 167). In their industriousness, by renouncing their quest for Truth and meaning, the protagonists of Voltaire’s roman philosophique are therefore able to attune themselves with the ever changing universe of modern science. Yet, Candide’s end is Bouvard’s beginning: it is Bouvard and Pécuchet’s attempts to become successful gardeners which spark their encyclopaedic journey.
That being said, however compulsive and endless their encyclopaedic journey might be, it is also, nonetheless, a quest for Truth. As much as their journey is mechanical and repetitive, marked by the laborious, compulsive industriousness of their past as copyists, it is also pregnant with the hope of an opening, a final Truth; a way out from the radical closure of drive, for two clerks who, as copyists, have spent a life honouring Martin’s motto, “travailler sans raisonner”. Flaubert’s fictional encyclopaedia is therefore more than the product of a blind drive for knowledge, the mere monstrous hypertrophy of an “acephalous” knowledge. Like in Faust, the phantasmic dimension of desire, the search for a meaningful Truth, is not only present; it is the very raison d’être sustaining a narrative, which is simultaneously the narrative of a meaningless, blind drive. With the coup de foudre of their initial encounter, a rift is opened in the closed circuit of their lives as copyists; out of the amniotic Word in which they were immersed, they awaken to the life-world, to the dimension of desire. Yet, as they emerge from their sleepwalking life as copyists, they enter this dimension of desire and truth precisely because they (mis)perceive their ignorance, the “inner vacuity” (Cosset 71) of their bureaucratic life, as a fundamental lack; it is this sense of “lack” which triggers their intellectual quest. As a result, Bouvard is not only an encyclopaedic journey but also a quest for an ultimate, yet fundamentally phantasmatic, Truth; phantasmatic, because it is an unattainable, always missed Truth, constantly relocated in the next book to read, the next authority to consult, the next science to tackle.

There is nothing more phantasmic than the Truth Bouvard and Pécuchet hanker after. Within a strict conception of Truth as ‘factual truth’, it could be argued that they are unable, unlike good scientists, to spiral asymptotically closer to Truth. Yet, this final Truth which Bouvard and Pécuchet so desperately seek is the fundamental fantasy which sparks and sustains their encyclopaedic journey; in their quest for Truth, the two copyists go from one authority to the next ultimately aiming for a phantasmic “Auteur du savoir … créateur et possesseur de
‘biens’ dont on peut jouir pour peu qu’on le veuille” (Assoun 107) (“Author of knowledge … creator and possessor of ‘goods’ which we can enjoy if only we want it”) (my translation). It is a fantasy which the two heroes renounce only at the end, when they decide to become copyists once again, thus returning to their original symbolic matrix.

However, it is precisely when Bouvard and Pécuchet renounce truth that they find it, when they forfeit the deadlock of desire – “the truth of desire is the desire of truth” (Fantasy 37). This is the truth that Flaubert pursues in his novel. The debate about whether Flaubert is merely portraying two incompetent autodidacts or whether he is actually launching a scathing attack on science misses the point. Too often, his two heroes and their curiosity are regarded as mere (grotesque) narrative devices for Flaubert to proceed to a comprehensive panorama of the forms of knowledge of his times. Even their recurrent failures are presented as a way for Flaubert to remain on course in his encyclopaedic journey. Yet, at the same time, the thirst for Truth of his two heroes, their true redeeming passion, is the (artistic) truth Flaubert is aiming at. In the end, Bouvard stages the complex dialectic between drive and desire, between Knowledge and Truth. The two copyists schizophrenically embody the impossible reconciliation of an increasingly meaningless drive for knowledge and an all too human desire for meaning and truth.

Yvan Leclerc notes about Bouvard in La Spirale et le monument:

On passe d’une étude à l’autre par un manque-à-savoir… . La progression dans l’Encyclopédie prend les allures d’une régression à l’infini. Pas de passage positif d’un acquis à un autre, mais une fuite en arrière, d’un savoir lacunaire à un autre supposé préalable dont on espère qu’il servira de fondement et qui se révèle tout aussi défectueux, et ainsi de suite à rebours. On les croyait s’élevant, et voici qu’ils s’enfoncent le long de la Spirale. (68)
We move from one science to the next through a lack-of-knowledge ... . The encyclopaedic progression takes the form of a regression to infinity. There is no positive movement from one mastered science to the next, but a backwards motion from a lacunary science to another supposedly prior to it and constituting its foundation, which turns out to be also defective. Instead of ascending, they are sinking along the Spiral. (my translation)

Rather than ascending the ladder of knowledge, our two protagonists take a plunge into what looks more like an abyss than a well of knowledge. On the one hand, as we will see, it is a free fall from knowledge in which Bouvard and Pécuchet painfully crash against an opaque, silent and blunt Real. On the other hand, their fall is a free fall into a bottomless abyss as the true nature of things recede continuously and remains inaccessible to our two protagonists’ compulsive drive for knowledge; in the attempt to attain the truth of things, their inner being, our two autodidacts are confronted instead by a void. In fact, in The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Terry Eagleton observes that the Kantian Thing-in-itself, which is imagined as a hard kernel of an ungraspable, purely external reality is in fact a purely imaginary entity, a phantasm produced by 19th century “rabid epistemophilia”. I will quote once more Eagleton’s passage for it is as though he had written it with Bouvard in his mind:

The thing-in-itself is thus a kind of empty signifier of that total knowledge which the bourgeoisie never ceases to dream of, but which its own fragmenting, dissevering activities continually frustrate. In the act of knowing, the subject cannot help but project from its inevitable partial perspective the phantasmal possibility of a knowledge beyond all categories, which then risks striking what it can know meagrely relative. The subject languishes in the grip of a rabid epistemophilia which is at once logical to its project – to hold the world in a single thought! – and potentially subversive to it. For such metaphysical delusions simply distract it from the proper business of actual knowledge, which must be always knowledge from one perspective or another. (77)
The phantasm of a total vision is therefore the necessary by-product of a compulsive drive for knowledge, relentlessly spiraling around the ultimately inaccessible secret of things. The suspicion that this secret kernel of truth might in fact be concealing a void proves to be unbearable. As Hegel points out in *Phänomenologie des Geistes*: “[D]amit ... in diesen so ganz Leeren, welches auch das Heilige genannt wird, doch etwas sei, es mit Träumereien, Erscheinungen, die das Bewußtsein sich selbst erzeugt, zu erfüllen ... den es wäre keines bessern würdig, indem Träumereien selbst noch besser sind, als seine Leerheit” (103) (“[I]n order ... that in this complete void, which is even called the holy of holies, there might yet be something, we must fill it up with reveries, appearances, produced by consciousness itself […] since even reveries are better than its own emptiness”; 89)

In Flaubert’s novel, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s phantasmic reveries and daydreaming come therefore to fill the gap left by the traumatic presence of the silent Things around which gravitates compulsively the drive for knowledge. However, as we have just noted, these fantasies should not be thought of as some kind of screen or veil blocking access to the Thing in-itself. Rather, the Thing should once more be thought as an impossibility that can only be conceived of as already mediated by desire. A good illustration of this can be found in chapter 4, when they find what will become the central artifact or “curiosity” of their private Museum:

[L]eur guide les mena dans un bois de hêtres, encombré par des masses de granit pareilles à des piédestaux, ou à de monstrueuses tortues.

La plus considérable est creusée comme un bassin. Un des bords se relève -- et du fond partent deux entailles qui descendent jusqu’à terre; c’était pour l’écoulement du sang; impossible d’en douter! Le hasard ne fait pas de ces choses.

Les racines des arbres s’entremêlaient à ces rocs abrupts. Un peu de pluie tombait; au loin, les flocons de brume montaient, comme de grands fantômes. Il était facile d’imaginer sous les feuillages, les prêtres en tiare d’or et en robe blanche, avec leurs victimes humaines les bras attachés dans le dos -- et sur le bord de la cuve la druidesse,
observant le ruisseau rouge, pendant qu’autour d’elle, la foule hurlait, au tapage des cymbales et des buccins faits d’une corne d’auroch.

Their guide led them into a beech wood, which was blocked up with masses of granite, like pedestals or monstrous tortoises. The most remarkable of them is hollowed like a basin. One of its sides rises, and at the further end two channels run down to the ground; this must have been for the flowing of blood—impossible to doubt it! Chance does not make these things.

The roots of the trees were intertwined with these rugged pedestals. In the distance rose columns of fog like huge phantoms. It was easy to imagine under the leaves the priests in golden tiaras and white robes, and their human victims with arms bound behind their backs, and at the side of the bowl the Druidess watching the red stream, whilst around her the multitude yelled, to the accompaniment of cymbals and of trumpets made from the horns of the wild bull (137-138).

Isolated ruin from a forgotten and pre-historic world, this silent “monstrous mass” is invested by Bouvard and Pécuchet’s curiosity and turned into a curiosity, a coveted object of desire. In other words, their desire to know, their burning desire to reintegrate the silent Thing into the symbolic chain of meaning is concomitant with their libidinal fantasy. This is precisely Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of the Enlightenment at work: the compulsive disenchanting of the world is untenable and eventually brings about a re-enchantment of it.

By virtue of the lack of Method of its two protagonists, Bouvard can illustrate the intimate link between two phenomena which are usually found in very different regions of culture: the disenchantment brought about by a compulsive drive for knowledge unremittingly exposing the idols of the tribe – the famous idées recues to which Flaubert dedicates a dictionary – and the ulterior re-enchantment as a fetishist desire to know coalesces into a future commonplace “truth”. We have seen how the Things encountered by Bouvard and Pécuchet excite their curiosity and trigger a quest for answers. Invariably, the quest fails, and as our heroes grow
increasingly discouraged, Things re-emerge in their original – and no less phantasmic – mysteriousness. A case in point is when, disenchanted by geology, Bouvard dozes off and Pécuchet abandons himself to a reverie which emerges from the very symbolic ruins of their geological meditations:

Enfin, Pécuchet ayant prononcé le mot de règne minéral:
-- Je n’y crois pas, au règne minéral! puisque des matières organiques ont pris part à la formation du silex, de la craie, de l’or peut-être! Le diamant n’a-t-il pas été du charbon: la houille un assemblage de végétaux: -- en la chauffant à je ne sais plus combien de degrés, on obtient de la sciure de bois, tellement que tout passe, tout coule. La création est faite d’une matière ondoyante et fugace. Mieux vaudrait nous occuper d’autre chose!

Il se coucha sur le dos, et se mit à sommeiller, pendant que Pécuchet la tête basse et un genou dans les mains, se livrait à ses réflexions.

Une lisière de mousse bordait un chemin creux, ombragé par des frênes dont les cimes légères tremblaient. Des angéliques, des menthes, des lavandes exhalaien des senteurs chaudes, épicées; l’atmosphère était lourde; et Pécuchet, dans une sorte d’abrutissement, rêvait aux existences innombrables éparses autour de lui, aux insectes qui bourdonnaient, aux sources cachées sous le gazon, à la sève des plantes, aux oiseaux dans leurs nids, au vent, aux nuages, à toute la Nature, sans chercher à découvrir ses mystères, séduit par sa force, perdu dans sa grandeur.

J’ai soif! dit Bouvard, en se réveillant (159).

Finally, Pécuchet having pronounced the word “mineral kingdom”:
“I don’t believe in it, this mineral kingdom, since organic substances have taken part in the formation of flint, of chalk, and perhaps of gold. Hasn’t the diamond been charcoal; coal a collection of vegetables? and by heating it to I know not how many degrees, we get the sawdust of wood, so that everything passes, everything goes to ruin, and everything is transformed. Creation is carried out in an undulating and fugitive fashion. Much better to occupy ourselves with something else.”

He stretched himself on his back and went to sleep, while Pécuchet, with his head down and one knee between his hands, gave himself up to his own reflections.
A border of moss stood on the edge of a hollow path overhung by ash trees, whose slender tops quivered; angelica, mint, and lavender exhaled warm, pungent odours. The atmosphere was drowsy, and Pécuchet, in a kind of stupor, dreamed of the innumerable existences scattered around him—of the insects that buzzed, the springs hidden beneath the grass, the sap of plants, the birds in their nests, the wind, the clouds—of all Nature, without seeking to unveil her mysteries, enchanted by her power, lost in her grandeur.

“I'm thirsty!” said Bouvard, waking up (118-119).

Disappointed by geology’s incapability to arrive to a principle that would hold the world together, the world explodes into a chaotic multiplicity of particulars, arousing a passive, dissipating and dissolving curiosity. This is precisely the moment when Pécuchet seems to experience the revelation of a higher Truth. His meditations take the form of an epiphany; for a moment, Pécuchet seems to hold the world in his head. Yet, in the end, this is nothing more than a phantasmagoric daydreaming. The concentrated, disciplinary effort to grasp the world and confine it within the limits of the garden, the library, the encyclopaedia is interrupted by diverting moments of dissipation, of sleep and meandering reverie and daydreaming. At first, we stressed the contrast between the dynamism of an endless, compulsive drive for knowledge and a fetishist desire to know arrested on a reified vision; at the same time, we can also consider, conversely, the drive for knowledge as “territorialized” into different areas of knowledge and the fetishist curiosity as a nomadic and fleeting Neugier jumping from one thing to the next. This dialectic between a compulsive, endless, drive for knowledge and a fetishist desire to know can also be found at the narratological and structural level of a novel that Flaubert had trouble to conclude, fearing perhaps that, more than with his other novels, in the case of Bouvard, “la bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure” (“stupidity consists in wanting to conclude”) 29.

29 Gustave Flaubert in a letter to Louis Bouilhet (September 4th, 1850).
Yet, in their efforts to attain the things-themselves, they are not merely clutching at the thin air of their innermost phantasms. As an inaccessible, hard kernel of reality, irrational and unrepresentable, the thing-in-itself is in Eagleton’s words, “brute facticity” (*Ideology* 77), grotesque and obscene materiality, by-product of our thought processes. This is in a nutshell the gist of Lukács’s critique of the Kantian Thing-in-itself, which Terry Eagleton sums up in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*:

[T]he opaqueness of the object in Kant is an effect of reification, whereby material products remain heterogeneous in their rich particularity to the formal, commodified categories which seek to encompass them. They must accordingly be consigned to the ‘irrational’ outer darkness of the unknowable, leaving thought to confront the mere shadow of itself. The *Ding-an-sich* is in this sense less some suprasensible entity than the material limit of all such reificatory thought, a faint echo to the real’s mute resistance to it. (qtd in Eagleton 77)

*Bouvard* is a farcical illustration of the mechanics of reificatory thought. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s encyclopaedia, garden and museum are caricatures of our categorizing and systematizing efforts which can only yield a mute yet brute, irrational and arbitrary response from the “Real”. Thanks to the notion of the Lacanian Real, understood as the object-cause of desire, it is possible to think the intimate link between the pursuit of truth and the constant farcical accidents that continuously postpone its attainment. That initial rift in the closed circle of their (intellectual) life which triggers the novel works both ways: it is experienced both as a way out, the promise of an elusive, ultimate Truth, but also as way for an arbitrary and contingent reality to abruptly enter the closed routine of their lives.

In light of this, it is not surprising to find a striking contrast between the deployment of the encyclopaedia, which follows a systematic, non narrative, logic, and the actual narrative,
chaotic and haphazard. Flaubert was aware that his novel needed “un semblant d’action, une espèce d’histoire continue pour que la chose n’ait pas l’air d’une dissertation philosophique” (letter to Mme Edma Roger des Genettes, 15 avril 1875) (there must be a pretense at action, a kind of continuous story so that the thing doesn’t seem like a philosophical dissertation; Letters 217). As Yvan Leclerc remarks, this (faux)-semblant d’action is characterized by the much commented use of “chance” (“hasard”) as a narrative device. It is not a coincidence that what looks too much like a “dissertation philosophique” “devient un espace experimental aléatoire où tout peut arriver.” (Leclerc 72) (“becomes a experimental, haphazard space where everything can happen”) (my translation). Žižek explains this paradox: “when one is sure that ‘Reason rules the world’, this means that one can be sure that a contingency will always emerge which will prevent the direct realization of our Goal” (Fantasies 129). The other side of this paradox is that a literary space which seems to follow no logic “si ce n’est celle de l’arbitraire, du discontinue, de l’illogique” (Spica 72) (“other than that of the arbitrary, the discontinuous, the illogical”) (my translation) is precisely what makes the whole idea of an impossible encyclopaedic quest for knowledge possible:

This necessity of the utter, imbecilic contingency, this enigmatic notion of an unexpected intrusion which none the less pops up with absolute inevitability (and has to pop up, since its non-arrival would entail the dissolution of the whole domain of the search for the Goal), is the highest speculative mystery, the true ‘dialectical synthesis of contingency and necessity’ (129)

In other words, it is this very intrusion of a haphazard and unfathomable reality that keeps Bouvard and Pécuchet’s quest alive and prevents it from collapsing into its final reified product, the Encyclopaedia. At work is what Brooks regards as the contradictory desire of narrative: “driving toward the end which would be both its destruction and its meaning, suspended on the
metonymic rails which tend toward that end without ever being able quite to say the terminus” (Reading 58).

4 Grace and gravity

In a way, Bouvard and Pécuchet have never stopped being copyists: Colonized as they are by a parasitic symbolic order, they merely parrot the Barthesian Voice of Science. About the symbolic order, Lacan observes:

L’entrée en fonction du système symbolique dans son usage le plus radical, absolu, vient à abolir si complètement l’action de l’individu, qu’il élimine du même coup son rapport tragique au monde … Au milieu de la marche des choses, du fonctionnement de la raison, le sujet se trouve exclu de toute participation qui soit proprement dramatique, et par conséquent tragique, à la réalisation de la vérité. (Séminaire II, 200-201)

The coming into operation of the symbolic function is in its most radical, absolute usage ends up abolishing the action of the individual so completely that by the same token it eliminates his tragic relation to the world … At the heart of the flow of events, the functioning of reason, the subject from the first move finds himself to be no more than a pawn, forced inside this system, and excluded from any truly dramatic, and consequently tragic, participation in the realization of truth. (168)

Bouvard and Pécuchet would then be mere pawns in the symbolic machine. As has been often noted, time does not really pass in the novel; while pursuing their symbolic odyssey, the two copyists do not really seem to be getting older. Their adventures are a confusing and disordered succession of anecdotes, ultimately without any dramatic or tragic consequences; despite repeated, contingent interruptions, nothing seems to disturb the over-arching re-enactment of the encyclopaedia. If “for a human being to be ‘dead while alive’ is to be colonized by the ‘dead’
symbolic order” (Žižek, *Fantasy* 89), Bouvard and Pécuchet have the rigidity of “undead” automatons, paradoxical “embodiments” of the symbolic order.

In *Bouvard*, Science, but also Religion and any other example of *paroles pleines* are, to use Jacques Rancière’s term, “desincorporated”, reduced to a “dead letter”, only supported by its own discursive materiality. As a result, Bouvard and Pécuchet seem to be progressively reduced to the role of indifferent and almost invisible conveyors of discourses. In “Flaubert’s Encyclopaedism”, Leo Bersani remarks how Pécuchet speaks at one point “out of character” (160); the consequence is that “[t]he narrator continues Pécuchet’s speech by eliminating him as its source” (160). This “aesthetization of discourse”, by which knowledge is severed “from its sources, its reception, and its possible uses” is for Bersani a fundamental poetic device: “Art is, by definition, an ontological relocation of the materials of philosophy and science.” (163). In the end, this ontological relocation is liberating: “[T]he narcissistic esthetizing of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s studies suggests that art transforms discursive communications into the privacy of a verbal *jouissance* [...] [S]tyle caresses an encyclopaedic culture out of its projects of mastery and into a liberalizing impotence” (164). The main problem with Bersani’s reading is how he places on the same level the “narcissistic esthetizing of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s studies” and Flaubert’s “aesthetization of discourses”. By remaining on a purely discursive level, Bersani ignores the fundamental contradiction between Flaubert’s “disembodying” aesthetization of the discourses of knowledge and his two autodidacts recurrent – and always unsuccessful – efforts to “incorporate” that knowledge.

Like the characters in *La Tentation*, as Foucault remarked in *La Bibliothèque fantastique*, Bouvard and Pécuchet act like marionettes. Merely reduced to invisible discursive supports, Bouvard and Pécuchet have the weightlessness of Kleist’s marionettes, at least for Bersani and
other tenants of the progressive effacement of Bouvard and Pécuchet. They would then be the perfect protagonists for Flaubert’s famous dream of a weightless book – evoked in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852:

\begin{quote}
Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l'air, un livre qui n'aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut. Les œuvres les plus belles sont celles où il y a le moins de matière. ... C'est pour cela qu'il n'y a ni beaux ni vilains sujets et qu'on pourrait presque établir comme axiome, en se plaçant au point de vue de l'Art pur, qu'il n'y en a aucun, le style étant à lui seul une manière absolue de voir les choses (Correspondance 31).
\end{quote}

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter ... It is for this reason that there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject – style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things” (Letters 154)

Indeed, Flaubert’s encyclopaedic novel seems to fulfill the dream of a novel without subject(-matter). Yet, the illusion of graceful weightlessness does not last long and is dissipated the moment Bouvard and Pécuchet crash against the ground, pulled down by gravity and their proverbial stupidity, which are after all the true subject-matter of Flaubert’s satirical “novel”. In their repetitive and almost compulsive epistemological attempts, they have the farcical rigidity of marionettes.
Bouvard is a true re-enactment of the encyclopaedia. The two protagonists not only parrot the voice of Science, they also ape its practices as mysterious rituals. On innumerable occasions, the two protagonists mimic the poses and attitudes of professional scientists, doctors or scholars, artists, adopting their attire and their language. The geological excursion is a good illustration of how the science of a multi-layered earth is reduced to a mere superficial play of appearances, a masquerade:

Avant d’entreprendre des explorations nouvelles ils consultèrent le Guide du voyageur géologue par Boné.

Il faut avoir, premièremenť, un bon havresac de soldat, puis une chaîne d’arpenteur, une lime, des pinces, une boussole, et trois marteaux, passés dans une ceinture qui se dissimule sous la redingote, et vous préserve ainsi de cette apparence originale, que l’on doit éviter en voyage. Comme bâton, Pécuchet adopta franchement le bâton de touriste, haut de six pieds, à longue pointe de fer. Bouvard préférait une canne-parapluie, ou parapluie-polybranches, dont le pommeau se retire, pour agrafer la soie contenue, à part, dans un petit sac. Ils n’oubliaient pas de forts souliers, avec des guêtres, chacun deux paires de bretelles, à cause de la transpiration et bien qu’on ne puisse se présenter partout en casquette ils reculèrent devant la dépense d’un de ces chapeaux qui se plient, et qui portent le nom du chapelier Gibus, leur inventeur. Le même ouvrage donne des préceptes de conduite: Savoir la langue du pays que l’on visite, ils la savaient. Garder une tenue modeste, c’était leur usage. Ne pas avoir d’argent sur soi, rien de plus simple. Enfin, pour s’épargner toutes sortes d’embarras, il est bon de prendre la qualité d’ingénieur!

Besides a passport, they were in need of many things, and before undertaking fresh explorations they consulted the Geological Traveller's Guide, by Boné. It was necessary to have, in the first place, a good soldier's knapsack, then a surveyor's chain, a file, a pair of nippers, a compass, and three hammers, passed into a belt, which is hidden under the frock-coat, and “thus preserves you from that original appearance which one ought to avoid on a journey.” As for the stick, Pécuchet freely adopted the tourist's stick, six feet high, with a long iron point. Bouvard preferred the walking-stick umbrella, or many-
branched umbrella, the knob of which is removed in order to clasp on the silk, which is kept separately in a little bag. They did not forget strong shoes with gaiters, “two pairs of braces” each “on account of perspiration,” and, although one cannot present himself everywhere in a cap, they shrank from the expense of "one of those folding hats, which bear the name of ‘Gibus,’ their inventor. The same work gives precepts for conduct: “To know the language of the part of the country you visit”: they knew it. “To preserve a modest deportment”: this was their custom. "Not to have too much money about you”: nothing simpler. Finally, in order to spare yourself embarrassments of all descriptions, it is a good thing to adopt the “description of engineer.” (106-7)

By dressing up as researchers, Bouvard and Pécuchet expect to be initiated into the mysteries of geology. Incapable of understanding the inner resorts of science, they cling to its external, formal, “performative” aspects. As Gasché remarks: “The seeing performed by the theoreticians is not itself visible, but the acts that they must perform for the purpose of theorizing can be seen” (137), “these acts offer the sight of an exotic ritual” (137). The lack at the heart of their discourses and their gestures foregrounds the “materiality” of discourses – their signifier – but also the materiality of their own bodies. Their re-enactment of the encyclopaedia is constantly interrupted by the mundane and down-to-earth urgencies of the life-world, by the farcical and painful slapstick of their attempts both at disciplining the world and at self-discipline. It is at this level that is exposed the fundamental symbolic violence that maintains the symbolic order; “violence” because it does not only refer to purely discursive or ideological power dynamics – Flaubert’s copyists parroting the “voice of Science” – but to their “mortified” bodies as the source of the farcical, grotesque humour of Bouvard. Aching from the constant falling, their two bodies are that Real which prevents the symbolic machine from running smoothly; in other words, the constant interruptions of this Real is what delays Bouvard and Pécuchet in their intellectual odyssey; but it is also what made possible their journey, the farcical encyclopaedia, in the first place, what created a rift in the close circuit of their dreary existence as copyists.
The counterpoint to the symbolic ‘undead machine’ is according to Žižek, the “the monstrous Life-Substance which persists in the Real outside the Symbolic” (Fantasy 89). In Bouvard, there is one particular passage in which there is a glimpse of the viscous Real: for a moment, our two heroes are confronted with death, thus momentariliy regaining a “tragic relation to the world”.

Ils voulurent faire comme autrefois une promenade dans les champs, allèrent très loin, se perdirent. -- De petits nuages moutonnaient dans le ciel, le vent balançait les clochettes des avoines, le long d’un pré un ruisseau murmuraient, quand tout à coup une odeur infecte les arrêta; et ils virent sur des cailloux, entre des joncs, la charogne d’un chien.

Les quatre membres étaient desséchés. Le rictus de la gueule découvrait sous des babines bleuâtres des crocs d’ivoire; à la place du ventre, c’était un amas de couleur terreuse, et qui semblait palpiter tant grouillait dessus la vermine. Elle s’agitait, frappée par le soleil, sous le bourdonnement des mouches, dans cette intolérable odeur, une odeur féroce et comme dévorante.

Cependant Bouvard plissait le front; et des larmes mouillèrent ses yeux. -- Pécuchet dit stoïquement: Nous serons un jour comme ça! (321)

They thought of taking a walk as of yore through the fields, wandered too far, and got lost. The sky was dotted with little fleecy clouds, the wind was shaking the tiny bells of the oats; a stream was purling along through a meadow—and then, all at once, an infectious odour made them halt, and they saw on the pebbles between the thorn trees the putrid carcass of a dog.

The four limbs were dried up. The grinning jaws disclosed teeth of ivory under the bluish lips; in place of the stomach there was a mass of earth-coloured flesh which seemed to be palpitating with the vermin that swarmed all over it. It writhed, with the sun's rays falling on it, under the gnawing of so many mouths, in this intolerable stench—a stench which was fierce and, as it were, devouring.

Yet wrinkles gathered on Bouvard's forehead, and his eyes filled with tears.

Pécuchet said in a stoical fashion, “One day we shall be like that.” (294-5)
The “seemingly palpitating” corpse of the dog constitutes for an instant “the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization (‗lamella’)” (89). Yet, not for a long time: as they move away from this scene, words, like “vermin”, colonize and eat away the traumatic presence of death, leaving a gap which will be filled with a pantheistic fantasy:

L’idée de la mort les avait saisis. Ils en causèrent, en revenant.
Après tout, elle n’existe pas. On s’en va dans la rosée, dans la brise, dans les étoiles. On devient quelque chose de la sève des arbres, de l’éclat des pierres fines, du plumage des oiseaux. On redonne à la Nature ce qu’elle vous a prêté et le Néant qui est devant nous n’a rien de plus affreux que le néant qui se trouve derrière.
Ils tâchaient de l’imaginer sous la forme d’une nuit intense, d’un trou sans fond, d’un évanouissement continu. N’importe quoi valait mieux que cette existence monotone, absurde, et sans espoir. (321)

The idea of death had taken hold of them. They talked about it on their way back.
After all, it has no existence. We pass away into the dew, into the breeze, into the stars. We become part of the sap of trees, the brilliance of precious stones, the plumage of birds. We give back to Nature what she lent to each of us, and the nothingness before us is not a bit more frightful than the nothingness behind us.
They tried to picture it to themselves under the form of an intense night, a bottomless pit, a continual swoon. Anything would be better than such an existence—monotonous, absurd, and hopeless. (295)

5 The Library-Encyclopaedia

As the vermin of words suffocates reality, the narrative eventually dies out and we are left with the product of a congealed desire: the encyclopaedia. This monumental Encyclopaedia stands as the ultimate phantasm of an autonomous intellectual order. In his article “The Museum’s Furnace”, Donato prefers to talk about the Library-Encyclopaedia. This conflation of
the horizontal space of the territorialized encyclopaedia with the verticality of the towering, phallic, Babel-like Library is highly significant. In his article about the importance of dictionaries and encyclopaedias in the 19th century, Jean-Yves Mollier regards them as typical of the “hubris” of the end of the century and its aspiration to build a “bibliothèque contenant toutes les bibliothèques du monde, Babel surélevée jusqu’à la voûte céleste, l’édifice entrepris est qualifié de monument dressé pour rendre hommage au génie de l’homme” (336) (“library containing of the world’s libraries, Babel reaching towards the skies, a building described as a monument erected to honour the genius of humanity”) (my translation). This modern “tour du savoir” (330) would be a “cathédrale laïque de la connaissance” (337) (“secular cathedral of knowledge”) (my translation) erected in honour of an unprecedented thirst for knowledge and a quasi-religious faith in progress and Science. “Envers critique” (339) (“critical counterpart”) (my translation) of this encyclopaedic enterprise, Flaubert’s farcical encyclopaedia, Bouvard et Pécuchet, stands also as a monument, but as a massive and hollow one, within whose thick walls a wandering curiosity can wander around.

Bouvard and Pécuchet’s symbolic “odyssey” takes place within the confines of the well demarcated provinces of knowledge, the encyclopaedia or “circle of sciences”. As we mentioned before, because of this sense of symbolic confinement, Bouvard has been read an overblown amplification of Faust’s first verses. Faust is both physically confined to a dungeon isolated from the world; and metaphorically imprisoned in an intellectual Kerker: the encyclopaedia is experienced as an asphyxiating and hermetic prison-house. For Bouvard and Pécuchet, there seems to be no way out of the symbolic Kerker. At the same time, and this explains the privileged place that Flaubert and Bouvard occupy in literary theory, the metaphor of the prison-house seems to experience a fundamental shift in Bouvard: Faust’s dark, Gothic Kerker is now figured as a comfortable country-house in which Flaubert’s two domestic Fausts en pantouffles
feel at home; in the century of the explosion of knowledge and erudition, the intellectual Kerker is now figured less as a prison-house and more as a closed but somehow airier space, a phantasmic Library, in which Bouvard and Pécuchet’s curiosity can wander around.

In Das Passagen-Werk, Walter Benjamin writes a few evocative lines about this new imaginary territory of a boundless Library, a space which ends up supplanting the “real” world itself:

Diese Niederschrift, die von den pariser Passagen handelt, ist unter freiem Himmel begonnen worden wolkenloser Bläue, die überm Laube sich wölbte und doch von den Millionen von Blättern, in denen die frische Brise des fleißes, der schwerfällige Atem des Forschers, der Sturm des jungen Eifers und das träge Lüftchen der Neugier rauschten, mit vielhundertjährigem Staube bedeckt worden. Denn der gemalte Sommerhimmel, der aus Arkaden in den Arbeitssaal der pariser Nationalbibliothek hinuntersieht, hat seine träumerische, lichtlose Decke über ihr ausgebreitet. (571)

These notes devoted to the Paris arcades were begun under an open sky of cloudless blue that arched above the foliage; and yet – owing to the millions of leaves that were visited by the fresh breeze of diligence, the stertorous breath of the researcher, the storm of youthful zeal, and the idle wind of curiosity—they’ve been covered with the dust of centuries. For the painted sky summer that looks down from the arcades in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has spread out over them its dreamy, unlit ceiling. (457-8)

In his famous article “Fantasia of the Library”, Foucault traces back the emergence of this “new imaginative space” of the Library to Flaubert’s La Tentation de Saint-Antoine:

Ce lieu nouveau des fantasmes, ce n’est plus la nuit, le sommeil de la raison, le vide incertain ouvert devant le désir: c’est au contraire la veille, l’attention inlassable, le zèle érudit, l’attention aux aguets. Un chimérique peut naître de la surface noire et blanche des signes imprimés, du volume ferme et poussiéreux qui s’ouvre sur un envol de mots
oubliés ; il se déploie soigneusement dans la bibliothèque assourdie, avec ses colonnes de livres, ses titres alignés et ses rayons qui la ferment de toute part, mais bâillent de l’autre côté sur des mondes impossibles. (9)

[The] domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. (47)

According to Foucault, Bouvard brings the logic of the Library to its last consequences: while in La Tentation books are processed and transformed into “purs fantasmes pour le regard” (27) (“a display of pure phantasms”; 58), “Bouvard et Pécuchet sont tentés directement par les livres, par leur multiplicité indéfinie, par le moutonnement des ouvrages dans l’espace gris de la bibliothèque” (27) (“Bouvard and Pécuchet are directly tempted by books, by their endless multiplicity, by the frothing of works in the grey expanse of the library”; 58). As a result, “Bouvard et Pécuchet triomphent de tout ce qui est étranger au livre et lui résiste, en devenant eux-mêmes le movement continu du Livre (31) (“Bouvard et Pécuchet triumph over everything alien to books, all that resists the book, by transforming themselves into the continuous movement of the book”; 61). In Bouvard’s fictional encyclopaedia, the “order of words” achieves autonomy from the “order of things”. According to Donato, thanks to this momentous gesture, Flaubert enters the postmodern pantheon as a “linguistic nihilist” (Donato 217) avant la lettre, an implacable critic of “realism” exposing the “incapacity of linguistic or symbolic representation to account for reality” (218). As Bouvard and Pécuchet take a progressively more inconspicuous role, reduced to mere conveyors of discourses, we are introduced into the fantastic/phantasmic realm of the Library-Encyclopaedia where the desires of Bouvard and
Pécuchet – no less than Flaubert’s and the readers’ own desires – find satisfaction in écriture’s mesmerizing phantasmagoria.

This reading of Flaubert’s last novel has become nowadays a commonplace. Or to be more accurate: Bouvard itself has played a key role in the consecration of the metaphor of the Library, relayed to Foucault through Borges. As Foucault notes, following Flaubert, “Le Livre de Mallarmé deviendra possible, puis Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Pound, Borges. La bibliothèque est en feu” (10): (“Mallarmé is able to write Le Livre and modern literature is activated – Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Pound, Borges. The library is on fire; 48). As we have been suggesting, the main limitation of this reading of Bouvard is that it reduces the novel to its final metaphor: for, it is only at the end of the novel that Bouvard and Pécuchet effectively withdraw from the scene into their original anonymity as copyists. In other words, it is only at the end of the novel that “le monde des livres se substitue entièrement au livre du monde” (Compagnon 141). Nevertheless, as a novel about “knowledge”, Bouvard necessarily addresses the problematic nature of the relationship between the imaginary space of the fantastic Library and the social and physical spaces which constitute the prosaic reality of the novel. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s desire to know is unable to escape the force field of a “reality” understood not so much as the positive “reality” described by the novel, but rather as a “negative” resistance. As a result, their journey is not an aimless drifting away in “l’espace gris de la bibliothèque” (“the grey expanse of the library”), “sans terme, sans chimère, sans gourmandise, sans péchés, sans désir” (31) (“without end, without illusion, without greed, without sin, without desire”), but rather a compulsive gravitation around an inaccessible kernel of Truth, which is, at the same time, the central void of their proverbial ignorance.
This paradox of the kernel/void is in fact brought to its paroxysm in the final metaphor of the encyclopaedia/library. For, even this apparently decentred and boundless symbolic universe to which Bouvard and Pécuchet return at the end of the novel is marked by a fundamental and central lack. At the centre of the library’s “grey expanse”, we are confronted with the very literal presence of the Library in its physical materiality – “the arcades in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale” and the Foucauldian “hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure”. The metaphor of the Library/Encyclopaedia stands as the supreme phantasm of an autonomous symbolic order detached from reality. As a phantasm in the Lacanian sense, it fills the central void which anchors the symbolic order in the Real. In fact, figured as a dungeon – both towering donjon and Faustian Kerker – the Library/Encyclopaedia fulfills the paradoxical role of the Lacanian phallic signifier: both a phallic Ivory tower and a dark prison-house, a void around which the symbolic order is built. Pascal had already evoked the fundamental paradox of the kernel/void: “nous brûlons du désir de trouver une assiette ferme, et une dernière base constante pour y édifier une tour qui s’élève à l’infini, mais tout notre fondement craque et la terre s’ouvre jusqu’aux abîmes” (167) (“we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses; 19-20). However, while for Pascal, this paradox is the proof of man’s misery and precarious station in the world, according to Lacan’s logic of the phallic signifier, it is the very abyss, supreme expression of lack, which contradictory supports and makes possible the symbolic order. In other words, the boundless expanse of an apparently detached encyclopaedia owes its existence to the very walls within which it is contained. These spectral walls are precisely the paradoxical Lacanian Real, both lack and surplus; invisible to Bouvard and Pécuchet, and yet painfully present, as the constant stumbling, falling and crashing of the two heroes bears witness to. It is
by portraying two “thick” heroes, that Flaubert can expose the thickness of the walls isolating Bouvard and Pécuchet. Yet, the erecting of walls remains profoundly ambivalent: on the one hand, it is certainly related with the withdrawal of intellectuals – the *trahison des clercs*; but, at the same time, it has to do with the aspiration to attain an autonomous space of one’s own, an ambition all the more poignant for these two copyists, whose original occupation as copyists is the supreme example of symbolic alienation.

The liberating aesthetical gesture of turning the symbolic field into an unbounded imaginary expanse can only be achieved at the end of the novel. At this point, the reality of the underlying symbolic field – a reality exposed by the novel – is finally repressed. For, the phantasm of the free-floating and unlimited intellectual space into which Bouvard and Pécuchet withdraw obscures the reality of an intellectual space which, by the mid 19th century, had been already thoroughly surveyed and divided in plots, colonized by the different branches of an increasingly institutionalized and specialized pursuit of knowledge. In this new geography of knowledge, each science cultivates its own private field. In this context, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s nomadic curiosity acquires a new meaning. For, Bouvard and Pécuchet are not nomads by choice but are forced into nomadism. Rich with their inheritance (economic capital), Bouvard and Pécuchet remain however, in terms of cultural capital, intellectual pariahs in search of recognition and symbolic capital, constantly chased from every field of knowledge by the legitimate authorities. Furthermore, the comical resistance of their bodies to the efforts to incorporate knowledge is a proof of the fundamental symbolic violence at the root of a *disciplinarization* into institutional and professional systems with their own *habitus*, their own discursive practices and rituals. At the same time, in light of all this, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s return to copying should not be read only as a mere withdrawal to their alienated original condition. For, while during their life as clerks, copying was endured, copying is now finally
assumed and owned. Thus, the return to copying of the two copyists also represents the conquest of a symbolic space of their own: the encyclopaedia to which all discourses are now to be transplanted. If, as Bersani notes “Art is, by definition, an ontological relocation of the materials of philosophy and science” (163), Bouvard and Pécuchet have become artists. By becoming artists, these two idiots, through a process of progressive and mutual identification, have become one with their creator. In Les règles de l’art, Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes Flaubert’s pioneering efforts in delimiting an autonomous literary field. More than L’Éducation sentimentale, on which most of Bourdieu’s argument rests, Flaubert’s obsession with the drawing of boundaries is obvious in Bouvard. Both challenging cultural fragmentation and suffused with a pervasive anxiety of borders and boundaries, Bouvard et Pécuchet re-enacts and mirrors Flaubert’s but also our own ambivalent efforts to define an autonomous yet englobing literary space.
Flaubert, and in particular *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, represented for Barthes a moment of rupture, a turning point in Modernity. In the previous chapter, we saw how, according to Foucault, with their final withdrawal into the library, Flaubert’s two copyists, Bouvard and Pécuchet, fade into the background as the universe of discourse and language take the center stage. The act of copying signals a crisis, as Barthes argues in “La crise de la vérité”: there is in *Bouvard* the sudden realization that “le language ne présente aucune garantie. Il n’y a aucune instance, aucun garant du langage: c’est la crise de la modernité qui s’ouvre” (435) (“language presents no guarantee. There is no instance vouching for language: this is the beginning of the crisis of modernity”) (my translation). We thus see in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* foreshadowing signs of that “crisis of language” which will become one of the fundamental experiences of Modernity.

As Richard Sheppard observes in “The Crisis of Language”, there have been many crises of language in history, but the feeling of “linguistic aridity” (324) is certainly an experience that has become increasingly familiar and widespread in modernity. More specifically, the modern crisis of language is pervaded by a “real pessimism about the possibility of revivifying language” (324). However, although Bouvard and Pécuchet’s decision to come full circle and return to their original occupation as copyists represents the “failure” of their quest for knowledge – and an avowal of impotence on behalf of Flaubert himself – yet, by hermeneutical sleight of hand, Flaubert’s failure\(^\text{30}\) will later be deemed a “success”, once language, style, ceases to be considered a means to an end, but a sufficient end in itself; making virtue out of necessity, Leo

\(^{30}\) See Lawrence R. Schehr, “Flaubert’s failure.”
Bersani can then speak of a “liberating impotence” in the way Flaubert’s “style caresses an encyclopaedic culture out of its project of mastery” (164).

As a result, *Bouvard* is then primarily read as a novel about language and writing, even though questions of knowledge are central to it. For, let’s not forget it, *Bouvard* is a novel about an all-devouring desire to know, to grasp and “say” the world. Flaubert’s much touted anti-realism consists precisely in that he exposes the underlying libidinal economy of representation. This does not only mean that, as good Quixotic figures, Bouvard and Pécuchet live in the phantasmic space of the library – indeed their epistemophilia is above all a desire for bookish knowledge, a form of bibliomania. At the same time, their desire is truly a desire to know, a desire to pierce through the shared symbolic fiction that we call reality. Yet, the materiality of the world cannot be reduced to the solidified *idées reçues* that constitute (social) reality. Their desire is ultimately confronted to the “other” of desire: an opaque and meaningless reality. Yet, the moment this hard kernel of reality is regarded as the inaccessible, true inner being of things, we are succumbing to the supreme fantasy that spurs curiosity, mainly the phantasm of truth behind the veil, the curtain. Thus, as a tale of curiosity, *Bouvard* lends itself to two incompatible yet complementary readings: on the one hand, *Bouvard* enacts the progressive withdrawal into an order of words severed from the other of things; floating words out of which emerges the phantasmagoria that modern literature is; but, on the other hand, *Bouvard* not only enacts this withdrawal, but plainly *tells* it as a proverbial, cautionary tale, thus exposing literature’s phantasms and bearing witness to the fundamental ability of language to say and communicate human reality.

Canetti’s only novel, *Die Blendung*, published in 1933, will bring to its paroxysm the linguistic and epistemological crises of Flaubert’s last novel. In *Bouvard*, the bookish curiosity
of the protagonists, their desire for the written word, coexisted with a sensual curiosity for the order of things. The protagonist of the novel, Peter Kien, a world famous sinologist, is also consumed by a burning desire to know. However, this ivory-tower intellectual lives a secluded existence in his private library. His desire to know eschews the world, which he maintains at a distance, and focuses exclusively on the written word. Specialized in repairing and reconstructing damaged texts, our philologist will set about fixing that initial crack which triggers his own narrative, a crack through which an encroaching “order of things” invades his close and hermetic “order of words”. In *Die Blendung*, “reality”, understood as a shared symbolic “fiction”, has almost vanished. We have instead a gallery of radically isolated characters, among whom communication is practically impossible and who seem condemned to live in their own phantasmic “realities”. Yet, Canetti’s stated purpose to write a “Comédie Humaine an Irren” (“Erste” 225) (“Human Comédie of Madmen”; 206) cannot be regarded as strictly “anti-realist”. As he himself points out in “Das erste Buch: Die Blendung”: “[D]ie Welt war zerfallen, und nur wenn man den Mut hatte, sie in ihrer Zerfallenheit zu zeigen, war es noch möglich, eine wahrhafte Vorstellung von ihr zu geben. Das bedeutete aber nicht, daß man sich an ein chaotisches Buch zu machen hätte” (*Gewissen* 229) ([T]he world had crumbled, and only if one had the courage to show it in its crumbled state could one possibly offer an authentic conception of it. However, this did not mean that one had to tackle a chaotic book, in which nothing was comprehensible anymore; 210). Canetti simply refuses to cynically indulge in his characters solipsism: out of the cacophony of private languages, as we will see, a certain sense of “reality” emerges. Thus, even if the object of Peter Kien’s *epistemophilia* is the written word, the repressed reality returns nonetheless in the form of spectral apparitions and hallucinations.

Another example of an anti-mimetic stance that appears to be calling for a mimetic reading can be found in a famous short fiction, archetype of the turn-of-the-century Modernist
Sprachkrisis, Hugo von Hofmannstahl’s Ein Brief (1902). In this wonderfully terse short fiction, we find in a nutshell the very same tensions which underlie Die Blendung. In fact, no less than Bouvard et Pécuchet, Ein Brief showcases the complexity of the Modernist “crisis of language”, a crisis which is also an epistemological crisis. In this fictional letter addressed to the 17th century philosopher Francis Bacon, the eponymous, fictional poet, Lord Chandos, explains his decision to give up poetry. Chandos then proceeds to give a detailed account of the crisis he has undergone. Precocious poet, at nineteen he could write the most perfect works without difficulty; he even thought about composing an encyclopedia. At that time he had faith in language, in its ability to understand and order the cosmos: “mir erschien damals in einer Art von andauernder Trunkenheit das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit” (16) (“In those days I, in a state of continuous intoxication, conceived the whole of existence as one great unit”; 132); however, at one point this feeling of unity and coherence brutally collapses; this collapse is described soberly in a laconic sentence: “Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen” (13) (“My case in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently”; 133). He further explains: “Ich empfand ein unerklärliches Unbehagen, die Worte ‘Geist’, ‘Seele’ oder ‘Körper’ nur auszusprechen … die abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, um irgendwelches Urtheil an den Tag zu geben, zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze (14) (“I felt an accountable discomfort whenever I simply tried to pronounce the words “spirit”, “soul”, or “body”…the abstract words that the tongue necessarily shapes when passing any kind of judgment simply fell to dust in my mouth like decaying mushrooms” (133). It is not a coincidence that the letter is addressed to the philosopher Bacon; the philosopher who sought to purge language and rid it of all afferent and distorting illusions and idols; however, the contrast is here very telling between the optimism of Bacon, for whom
this purified language can then become an instrument of knowledge and truth, and the pessimism of Chandos, for whom the experience of a decaying and decomposing language is accompanied by an identity crisis, and, more important to us, by a sense of loss of reality.

If for Bouvard and Pécuchet, the only alternative was to withdraw and become once more copyists, silence appears as the only viable alternative for a hopeless Lord Chandos; the possibility of a new poetry, of finding new “flowers amidst the ruins of language” (Sheppard 324) is dismissed by Chandos; yet, as “words desert” him, as language fails him, he experiences “etwas völlig Unbenanntes, und auch wohl kaum Benennbares, das in solchen Augenblicken, irgendeine Erscheinung meiner alltäglichen Umgebung mit einer überschwellenden Flut höheren Leben wie ein Gefäß erfüllend, mir sich ankündet” (17) (“something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which as such moments reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life”; 135): Chandos then describes the fleeting epiphanies that overcome him in those moments:

Eine Gießkanne, eine auf dem Feld verlassene Egge, ein Hund in der Sonne, ein ärmlicher Kirchhof, ein Krüppel, ein kleines Bauernhaus, alles dies kann das Gefäß meiner Offenbarung werden. Jeder dieser Gegenstände und die tausend anderen ähnlichen, über die sonst ein Auge mit selbstverständlicher Gleichgültigkeit hinweggleitet, kann für mich plötzlich in irgendeinem Moment, den herbeizuführen auf keine Weise in meiner Gewalt steht, ein erhabenes und rührendes Gepräge annehmen, das auszudrücken mir alle Worte zu arm scheinen. (17)

A pitcher, a harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant’s hut – all of these can become the vessel of my revelation. Each of these objects and a thousand others similar, over which the eye usually glides with a natural indifference, can suddenly, at any moment (which I am utterly powerless to evoke), assume for me a character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it. (135-6)
Once the barrier of language which kept the world at bay has collapsed, Chandos finds himself in a true desert of the Real; surrounded by the uncanny presence of Things. In *Die Revolution der deutschen Prosa. Hofmannstahl, Rilke, Musil, Kafka, Heym*, Walter Jens saw in *Ein Brief* a fundamental text about the widening cleavage between language and reality, and the progressive dissolution of an “Ich” overwhelmed by the encroaching presence of objects. In “Der Rost der Zeichen”, Claudio Magris regards these epiphanies as a form of “mystical tautology” by means of which things point only to themselves and are not a sign for anything else. No meaningful “concept” can recuperate them in the immediacy of their solitary singularity. The enumeration brings together a contingent, arbitrary, and meaningless series of “banal objects”, which, in a way reminiscent of Barthes’s *effet de réel*, simply say: “we are the real”. For Sheppard, on the contrary, these apparently random objects are “ciphers that suggest tiredness, desertness, decrepitude and pathos” (324).

Interestingly, despite Chandos’s avowal of impotence – he feels “utterly powerless to evoke” these illuminations – many interpreters see these elusive epiphanies as announcing Dadaist and Surrealist linguistic experimentation – just like Bersani sees Bouvard and Pécuchet’s impotence as “liberating”. Richard Sheppard, for instance, makes this parallelism between *Ein Brief* and the “counter-culture” of the avant-gardes: “[T]he counter-culture discards notions of language as a human bastion against chaos and nothingness and sees it as a force which […] shapes itself under its own impetus into constellations of meaning which are both as luminous and transient as Chandos’s visions” (334). The crucial difference here between *Ein Brief* and avant-gardist literature, of course is that by willfully “discarding notions of language as a human

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31 In *The Banal Object: Theme and Thematics in Proust, Rilke, Hofmannstahl, and Sartre*, Naomi Segal compares Chandos’s crisis with Antoine Roquentin’s nausea in Sartre’s *La Nausée*. 
bastion”, the avant-gardes are actually re-appropriating and transforming into a poetic gesture what for Chandos remains an experience of impotence, loss and disintegration. As a result, a distance separates Hofmannstahl from the avant-garde artists, a distance that Richard Sheppard himself acknowledges:

Where older writers had unconsciously postulated a correspondence between the structures of human language and the structures of external reality, they had assumed that their universe of discourse was the universe and were dismayed when they experienced the break-up of these fictions; the counter-culture, following the Dadaists and Surrealists, dispenses joyfully with these fictions, experiences their loss as liberation, and permits cosmic powers to do what they will with language if only their surrender leads to a way out of the impasse presented by technological civilization. (334)

It remains an open-ended question whether the radical linguistic experiments of the avant-garde will be ultimately liberating and emancipating or will constitute a form of irresponsible escapism. The interest of Ein Brief is that, while it has been read as almost ushering Expressionism and Dadaism by critics like Claudio Magris; yet, at the same time, as Jacques Le Rider notes in Hugo von Hofmannstahl : historicité et modernité, the form of the Letter remains classical – to a certain extent, this is also the case of Bouvard, which seems a deconstruction of the realist novel, and, simultaneously, a down-to-earth and almost proverbial narrative of intellectual hubris. It is because of this internal, constituting structural tension that Flaubert and Hofmannstahl belong to that older Modernist generation of writers described by Sheppard as “‘acrobats’, ‘tightrope walkers’ and ‘dancers’ required to maintain a precarious balance on the edge of a crumbling cliff” (Sheppard 330)

And Hofmannstahl was certainly walking a tightrope. For most critics, Ein Brief has been read as Hofmannstahl’s own rejection of the “irresponsible” Aestheticist poetics of the end of the
century Symbolist poets. According to Le Rider, the poet Chandos should then be read as the “fictional alter ego” of Hofmannsthal who thereby exorcizes the dangerous temptation of a language completely divorced from everyday language; a temptation which Hofmannsthal himself, who was once close to the Symbolists, overcame by abandoning poetry for drama, therefore embracing the social function that, according to Hofmannsthal, is the duty of the poet to perform. However, regarding Chandos as a fictional alter ego of Hofmannsthal points to the aforementioned anomaly: as one critic, Thomas Kovach, puts it bluntly: how is it possible that “this letter, which depicts a failure of language, a lapse into total silence, in fact makes most eloquent use of the very language it purports to renounce” (91).

For Jacques Le Rider, this anomaly of a critique of language done in an assured and elegant prose is not regarded as being necessarily contradictory. Replaced in his (fictional) historical context, Chandos, before the crisis, appears as a “Renaissance man”; in his encyclopaedic ambitions, Le Rider sees the hubris of the Faustian man who aspires to a synthesis of all knowledge before the fragmentation of knowledge brought about by the episteme of the Enlightenment (80). Thus, while it is often stressed that, initially, Chandos possesses a unitary and coherent ego, his is also a life marked by constant yearning and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge:

Ich wollte. Ich wollte noch vielerlei. Ich gedachte eine Sammlung "Apophthegmata" anzulegen, wie deren eine Julius Caesar verfaßt hat. (10-11)

I wanted to decipher the fables, the mythical tales bequeathed to us by the Ancients, in which painters and sculptors found an endless and thoughtless pleasure deciphering them as the hieroglyphs of a secret, inexhaustible wisdom whose breath I sometimes seemed to feel as though from behind a veil. I well remember this plan. It was founded on I know not what sensual and spiritual desire: as the hunted hart craves water, so I craved to enter these naked, glistening bodies, these sirens and dryads, this Narcissus and Proteus, Perseus and Actaeon. I longed to disappear in them and talk out of them with tongues. And I longed for more. I planned to start an Apophthegmata, like that composed by Julius Caesar. (131)

As Le Rider points out, this constant yearning and desire to know finds paradoxical satisfaction in the unmediated epiphanies of his new life. If before his unquenchable desire to know was aroused by the belief that “all was allegory and that each creature was a key to all the others”, now, “knowledge” appears as non-intellectual and ineffably embodied: “it is as though my body consists of nought but ciphers which give me the key to everything”.

In Real Presences, Georg Steiner considers Ein Brief as going even further than Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language by exposing how words “fall derisively, desperately short of the resistant substance, of the existential matter of the world and of inward lives” (111). Not only is language unable to say the world but inevitably falsifies it. Steiner likens Chandos’s illuminations to Joyce’s “epiphanies” and Benjamin’s “aura”: “Such transcendental intuitions have sources deeper than language, and must if they are to retain their truth-claims, remain undeclared.” (112) While de-dramatizing what Steiner calls Chandos’s paradigmatic “despair of language”, Le Rider emphasizes the connection between Chandos’s epiphanies and the theme of the “voyant”. He mentions the famous passage, “Es überkam mich unter ihnen das Gefühl
furchtbarer Einsamkeit; mir war zumuth wie einem, der in einem Garten mit lauter augenlosen Statuen eingesperrt wäre; ich flüchtete wieder ins Freie‖(16) (“I was overcome by a terrible sense of loneliness; I felt like someone locked in a garden surrounded by eyeless statues. So once more I escaped into the open”; 135) – a passage where critics usually see an expression of a hopeless despair; Le Rider wonders instead:

En réalité, les statues sans yeux dont il se voit entouré, ne sont-elles pas les figures de ses contemporains de l’aristocratie anglaise, qui vivent enfermés dans un jardin, coupés de la nature et aveuglés par les mots qu’ils utilisent sans critique? Au contraire, Chandos n’est-il pas devenu taciturne, sans doute, mais voyant? (79)

In fact, the statues without eyes which he sees around him, are not they English aristocrats of his time, who lived secluded in a garden, cut off from Nature and blinded by the words that they use without any form of critique? On the contrary, although Chandos has certainly become taciturn, isn’t he a voyant? (my translation)

Leaving the garden of blind statues also means for Chandos to abandon his library and the galleries of his “musée de la Bildung” (90-1) and see the world with fresh new eyes.

We are here confronted by a conception of language as opening a “wound”, as creating a symbolic debt, a conception which had, according to Žižek, become a commonplace since Hegel: “with entry in the symbolic order, our immersion in the immediacy of the real is forever lost, we are forced to assume an irreducible loss” (Interrogating 141). Following this interpretation, the (post-)modernity of Hofmannstahl’s piece lies in depicting a true “symbolic death”; the rhetoric of death and decay is not metaphorical; with the crumbling of the symbolic order, Chandos seems to find himself in a true “desert of the Real”.

At this point, we need to pay a closer look to these apparently unmediated epiphanies, and at the random collection of ordinary, banal objects which seem suddenly invested with an
unknown, unknowable and ineffable, higher meaning. Hofmannstahl is not positing here an unknowable, mysterious, Kantian Thing-in-itself which the language of knowledge and truth cannot say – and which a renewed poetic language could hint at. Rather, the Letter seems to acknowledge a fundamental dialectical tension: it is precisely because of Chandos’s hubristic faith in an omnipotent language that reality is bound at one point to be experienced as irrational and inaccessible to language. We are confronted once more with the modern dialectic of curiosity: the desire to hold the world in one thought, to bind the world through symbols, results in the explosion of that same world into a myriad of random, meaningless fragments, curiosities of ambivalent status. The fact that they have been interpreted as both supremely meaningful and ultimately meaningless objects is an indication that we are here in presence of simple, arbitrary things, momentarily, haphazardly cast in the role of the Thing; for Lacan, the latter is non-symbolizable and should be regarded as a “an emptiness opened in the symbolic order” (Žižek, Interrogating 132). As a result, rather than as unmediated “real” objects beyond language, these objects are the very product of that language: “[T]he inert object is always the presentification, the filling of the hole around which the symbolic command articulates itself, of the hole retroactively constituted by this command itself and in no way a ‘pre-linguistic’ fact” (Interrogating 132). Ein Brief certainly condemns the positivist absolute faith in language, but it does not celebrate the illusory flight from language into a silent, “authentic” experience of an unknowable and ineffable reality – a flight which ends up being as alienating as believing that reality is perfectly knowable and communicable. One is reminded of the Marxist critique of the Kantian thing-in-itself by Georg Lukács, and, more recently, by Terry Eagleton. Chandos’s crisis would then be symptomatic of the modern self, who according to Eagleton in The Ideology of the Aesthetic, finds itself in a difficult position:
[W]edged [...] between an unknowable subjectivity on the one side and an unmasterable object on the other. The real world is irrational, beyond the mastery of the subject, a sheer invisible trace of resistance to the categories of the understanding, which confront it in the manner of empty, abstract forms expelling some brute facticity. (77)

Rather than celebrating this “brute facticity” as the true reality beyond language, Hofmannstahl presents it as the ultimate product of a realist and positivist conception of language. In the end, as Le Rider himself concludes, rather than as portraying a radical and cataclysmic “crisis of language.” Ein Brief should be read as “l’autocritique d’un intellectuel qui accordait trop d’importance aux mots” (94) (“the self-critique of an intellectual who granted too much importance to words”) (my translation). As a result, the alternative to this magical faith in an omnipotent language is neither silence nor the utopian new language of the avant-gardes, but a more sober and modest, we could even say, more classical, conception of language.

There is in Ein Brief a fundamental structural and thematic tension, between an aspiration to absolute knowledge and the painful experience of a hostile and meaningless universe, which will be brought to its paroxysm thirty years later in Elias Canetti’s Die Blendung. The protagonist of the novel is a perfect and grotesque example of Chandos’s initial intellectual hubris of an omnipotent language. Peter Kien, the greatest sinologist in the world, lives like a hermit in his private library, the biggest private library in Vienna, devoted to his scholarship. This middle-aged scholar is what the enthusiastic intellectual and encyclopaedist Chandos would have become, had he not undergone the life crisis described in his Letter. Yet, Peter Kien is about to go through a middle-age crisis of his own after he marries his maid Therese; he has to face the gradual and relentless encroaching of the world and reality on his private ivory tower. Daily life enters the four walls of his library first in the form of the new furniture bought by Therese. Kien will discover the potential of blindness, as a “weapon” to block out an
increasingly unpleasant reality. It all goes downhill from here: Kien appears increasingly as the grotesque victim of his “voluntary” blindness, which turns out to be a true blindness to the world. Instead of illuminations, he is prey to nothing more than delusional fantasies. We thus witness the gradual descent of the protagonist into madness as he is robbed and physically abused by his wife, expelled from his library-apartment and condemned to wander Vienna’s underbelly. Thanks to the intervention of his brother, the famous Parisian psychiatrist, Georg Kien, Peter is finally able to regain his library. But, then, unpredictably and without any apparent reason, he sets it on fire and perishes together with his book in the final conflagration.

Even more than *Ein Letter*, *Die Blendung* is strikingly contradictory at the formal level. Critics have wondered about a novel whose unequivocally experimental form simultaneously evinces a traditional “realist” form. The novel is clearly innovative in that it presents a grotesque gallery of characters who are incapable of communicating and remain isolated in their own rival private belief systems. Yet, as William Collins Donahue argues in *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti’s Auto-da-Fé*, despite being a novel rendering the grotesque, mutually exclusive linguistic solipsism of a group of characters, we are in the presence of an “‘epistemologically strong’ narrative” (7) which achieves clarity at the level of plot. It is not simply a matter of Canetti, like Hofmannstahl, simply refusing to indulge in the same linguistic solipsism that plagues his characters. There is something else. As we will see, the gaze and voice of the omniscient narrator are problematized; indeed, the place occupied by this narrator who “knows better” is the site of an ongoing struggle: all the characters covet it; they all want to impose their own vision and voice as the normative one. It is this uncomfortable place, impossible to occupy yet inescapable, that both the narrator and reader are asked to fill without filling it, in an exercise of impossible acrobatics.
1 “Kiens Wissbegier war geweck, Neugier kannte er nicht.”

Like *Bouvard, Die Blendung* starts with a stroll, a morning promenade: Every day, between seven and eight, Peter Kien, considered the “ersten Sinologen seiner Zeit” (16) (“greatest living authority on sinology”; 18), goes for his morning walk. It is the only time of the day when he allows himself some “liberties”, yet here too he does “all by rote” (16) (“hielt er auf Ordnung”; 14), like the rest of the day in his library: “In der Bibliothek lief alles am Schnürchen” (14) (“In his library everything went by clockwork”; 16). Peter Kien has nothing of the peripatetic philosopher: unlike Bouvard and Pécuchet’s state of receptiveness at the beginning of Flaubert’s novel, Kien purposively shuts himself off exerting a strict control over what enters his consciousness. After all, “Erfahrung war hier überflüssig” (13) (“experience was superfluous”; 15) for a “Gelehrter” at the service of Truth. In his library, Kien seems to have achieved that ideal of “absolute knowledge” where knowledge and truth are one and the same thing: “Wissenschaft und Wahrheit waren für ihn identische Begriffe. Man näherte sich der Wahrheit, indem man sich von den Menschen abschloß. Der Alltag war ein oberflächliches Gewirr von Lügen” (13) (“Knowledge and truth were for him identical terms. You draw closer from Truth by shutting yourself off from mankind. Daily life was a superficial clatter of lies”; 15). But, of course, the novel is going to be precisely about this interference noise, which keeps disturbing his intellectual efforts and preventing him from occupying that longed-for site where knowledge and truth coincide. However, the constant interruptions and intrusions of daily life in the closed cycle of Kien’s hermetic intellectual activity expose the impossibility of fully occupying that site and the constituting rift between knowledge and truth.

In the first chapter of the novel, a passerby in the street asks Kien for some directions: “Kiens Wissbegier war geweck, Neugier kannte er nicht.” (14) (“Kien’s appetite for knowledge was whetted; idle curiosity he did not know”; 16). It is not so much that low curiosity (*Neugier*)
is unknown to Kien as warded off. Just as Kien turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to the passerby, his own private library situated on the topmost floor of a four stories apartment building has its windows walled up to accommodate more bookshelves. In this way, in the blinded and hushed library, “[D]ie Versuchung, das Treiben auf der Straße zu beobachten – eine zeitraubende Unsitte, die man offenbar mit auf die Welt bekommt – fiel mit den Seitenfenstern weg” (21) (“the temptation to watch what went on in the street – an immoral and time-wasting habit – disappeared with the side windows”; 23); nothing, nobody could anymore “von ernsten Gedanken ablenkte” (21) (“lure him from his serious thoughts”; 23). To the temptation of this dispersing, centrifugal Neugier, Kien opposes his Wissbegier, his “Konzentration” (“power of concentration”), the centripetal force holding together the strong, cultivated Charakter of this “Gelehrter”. The library is the true “embodiment” of his cohesive, centered Ego, closed off, without any cracks or openings.

Kien’s caricaturally unitary “Charakter” should be read as the grotesque counterpoint and response to the no less caricatural “diluted, less substantial self” (Crary 79) posited by neo-empiricists like Mach, Brentano or James. Similarly, Kien’s constant fear of a tempting, dispersing and alienating Neugier should be read in light of the motif of – to use Jonathan Crary’s expression – “sensory overload” (Crary 39) which, at least since Baudelaire, regards modern urban life as the cause of states of dispersal and distraction characteristic of Modernity. For Krakauer, Simmel or Benjamin, Modernity’s fragmented self is a product of this “sensory overload”. Yet, as Jonathan Crary has masterfully argued, any account of distraction in modernity must necessarily pay attention to the opposite paradigm: attention or concentration. Indeed, in Die Blendung, Kien’s constant fear of distraction is indissoluble from his repeated, self-disciplining attempts “seine alte Konzentration zurückzufinden” (42) (“to recover his old power of concentration”; 44).
However, it is important to insist on the farcical context of the “sensory overload” about which Kien complains: the invasion of his private intellectual space by the few pieces of furniture purchased by his wife. Kien is in fact a good example of the inversion of the cause-effect relationship between distraction and attention noted by Crary: rather than a cause, distraction turns out to be “an effect, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects” (Crary 49). Kien’s voluntary blindness is a paradigmatic example of his self-disciplining efforts, which interestingly manifest themselves in the opposite way in his constant efforts to remain awake and aware, fighting off sleep by keeping his eyes open, thus following the example of Japanese scholar Arai Hakuseki who emptied buckets of water over his head to remain awake. But even when he falls asleep, Kien claims that his dreams are reasonable and finds normal meaning in them (18; 20); in fact, “[s]eine Träume regulieren sich automatische” (423) (“his dreams can be automatically regulated”; 384), to the point that, hilariously, when he is sleeping, ((s)ein Kopf liegt in ernsten Gedanken auf den Schreibtisch” (423) (“his head rests, deep in serious thought”; 384). Even his recurring – uncannily premonitory – nightmares involving books and fire are explained away, for “[i]n seine Bestandteilen zerlegt, verliert ein Traum seine Macht” (40) (“divided into its elements a dream loses its terrors”; 41). Yet, all this disciplining of the body and the mind at the service of an intellectual discipline ends up backfiring; as Crary’s observes, “attention always contained within itself the conditions for its own disintegration [and is] in fact continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance” (Crary 46-7). Crary points out that many classical critical studies of “distraction” at the turn of the 20th century relied on a concept borrowed from Kant’s theory of knowledge, Zerstreuung; “a scattering of perception outside any necessary synthesis” (qtd. in Crary, 48). According to Kant, without the synthetic faculty of the understanding, perceptions are “merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream”
(qtd. in Crary 48). Nevertheless, in the case of Kien, it is precisely the monomaniac, totalizing, desire for synthesis which triggers a blind play of nightmarish representations.

The all pervasive dichotomy \textit{Wissbegier/Neugier} that structures the novel is heavily gendered: Kien sees his masculine, active \textit{Wissbegier}, industriously working on the construction of a monumental (phallic) edifice of knowledge, threatened by the dissolving power of a feminine, passive \textit{Neugier}, embodied in Therese and Peter Kien’s brother, the famous psychiatrist Georg. This antagonism together with Kien’s rampant misogyny and his fear of women are so caricatural – in a clear reference to Otto Weininger – that they should be read as satirising what Le Rider, in \textit{Modernité viennoise et crises de l’identité}, refers to as “crises of masculine identity”. Profoundly misogynistic, Kien compares his brother Georg, psychiatrist and gynaecologist, to an actor and to a woman: “Du bist neugierig, ich nicht. … Eigentlich bist du eine Frau. Du bestehst aus Sensationen. Laß dich nur laufen, von einer Neuigkeit in die andere! Ich stehe fest“ (484) (“Your are curious, I am not. … The truth is you’re a woman. You live for sensations. Let yourself go then, chase from one novelty to the next! I stand firm; 436). The feminine appears in fact as the prototypical object of knowledge needing to be fixated and pinned down; and, therefore, \textit{Wissbegier} as a fundamentally male desire to know. Yet, the feminine is nothing more than a masculine phantasmic projection: for, instead of slippery and soft, the feminine can also be quite “masculine”, an immobile, hard inassimilable rock, like Therese’s bulky skirt: petrifying Medusa head returning a, suddenly objectified, male phallic gaze.

Before continuing to develop our dualistic model (\textit{Wissbegier/Neugier}), it is important to observe that, traditionally, the novel’s underlying libidinal economy is analysed using Canetti’s own categories, as first laid out by Georg Kien, the psychiatrist, towards the end of the novel – and often seen as a first approximation to the antagonism between \textit{Persönlichkeitsstrieb} and
Massentrieb developed in Masse und Macht. Georg Kien prides himself in having discovered the Massentrieb, which he defines as:

Von der viel tieferen und eigentlichsten Triebkraft der Geschichte, dem Drang der Menschen, in eine höhere Tiergattung, die Masse, aufzugehen und sich darin so vollkommen zu verlieren, als hätte es nie einen Menschen gegeben, ahnten sie nichts. Denn sie waren gebildet und Bildung ist ein Festungsgürtel des Individuums gegen die Masse in ihm selbst. (453)

[T]hat far deeper and most special motive force of history, the desire of men to rise into a higher type of animal, in to the mass, and to lose themselves in it so completely as to forget that one man ever existed, they had no idea. For they were educated men, and education is in itself a cordon sanitaire for the individual against the mass in his own soul. We wage the so-called war of existence for the destruction of the mass-soul in ourselves, no less than for hunger and love. (410-411)

Our caricatural man of Bildung, Peter Kien would then exemplify the antagonistic drive: the Persönlichkeitstrieb. Already in the first chapter, Peter Kien does not conceal his contempt for the mob and his own “personality cult” inseparable from “sein Dienst an der Wahrheit” (13) (“his service for truth”; 15):

Who among those all these bad actors, who made up the mob, had a face to arrest his attention. They changed faces with every moment; not for one single day did they stick to the same part. ... *His* ambition was to persist stubbornly in the same manner of existence. Not for a mere month, not for a year, but for the whole of his life, he would be true to himself. Character, if you had character, determined your outward appearance. Ever since he had been able to think, he had been tall and too thin. He knew his face only casually, from its reflection in bookshop windows. He had no mirrors in his house, there was no room for it among the books. But he knew his face was narrow, stern and bony; that was enough. (16)

Our two pairs of opposites, *Wissbegier/Neugier* and *Persönlichkeitstreib/ Massentrieb*, are not opposed along the same lines. Indeed, if we overlap them, the opposition which concerns us, that of a centripetal *Wissbegier* and centrifugal *Neugier*, becomes interestingly ambivalent. In an explicit criticism of Freud’s emphasis on the individual psyche, Canetti takes the crowd as his starting point. As a result, from the point of view of the knowing ego, *Wissbegier*, is a centripetal force holding together a self-possessed, self-conscious, rational subject of the Enlightenment; but from the point of view of the mass, it is a centrifugal force of separation and alienation from other men. As Canetti himself writes at the beginning of *Masse und Macht*: “auf einem bestimmten, sicheren Platze steht der Mensch und hält sich alles, was ihm in die Nähe kommt mit wirkungsvollen Rechtsgebärden vom Leibe … In seinen Distanzen erstarrt und verdüstert der Mensch‖ (13) (“A man stands by himself on a secure and well defined spot, his every gesture asserting his right to keep others at a distance. ... Man petrifies and darkens in the distances he has created”; 17-8). So happens to the Truth he seeks, inevitably tainted by his own curious knowing ego and condemned to be its mere reflection or projection. On the other hand, *Neugier*, which from the point of view of a knowing ego is a centrifugal drive, dispersing and alienating, is, from the point of view of mass, strangely liberating, close to what Canetti in *Masse und Macht* calls the “die Entladung” (“the discharge”), that is the dissolution of individual
differences which brings the crowd together. The crowd would then embody a higher form of living truth, non-subjectified and opposed to the petrified and monumental “truth” of Bildung.

Rather than the Enlightenment’s narrative from a childish, low Neugier to a mature, sublimated Wissbegier, Die Blendung exposes an ultimately self-destructive core of darkness in Kien’s enlightened Wissbegier: mark of the self-possessed subject of the Enlightenment, Wissbegier turns out to be an alienating drive finding satisfaction in “work” and in the production and accumulation of knowledge, rather than in the attainment of truth. This compulsive epistemological drive is reminiscent of the blind insistence found in later Freud’s and especially Lacan’s notion of the death drive. It is precisely when he is absorbed in his work, lost in his Kopfbibliothek, that Kien seems to be possessed by a parasitic and foreign agency, the symbolic order, completely deaf and blind to his (bodily) needs. Žižek observes that for the later Lacan: “The symbolic order is striving for a homeostatic balance, but there is in its kernel, at its very centre, some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into the symbolic order – the Thing” (Interrogating 132). The point here is that Wissbegier is undermined from within; the distracting Neugier, as well as the distracting intrusion of Therese and her furniture, come to fill an already existing gap at the heart of Wissbegier.

Die Blendung apparently subverts the “coming to know”, realist, novel, which rests, according to Philip Weinstein, on a “enlightenment narrative” of education, “escape from self-incurred tutelage, daring to know”. Nonetheless, although it is also a narrative about “failed knowing”, Canetti’s novel, like Bouvard, should not be read as one of Weinstein’s Modernist

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32 It is well known that Canetti was particularly critical of Freud’s theory of drives; yet, despite Canetti’s claims to the contrary, his dualistic model is, as Kirsch has remarked, structurally similar to Freud’s (Kirsch 424).
novels about “unknowing”. Weinstein looks at a series of Modernist narratives that challenge the “analytico-referential discourse that arose in the seventeenth century and dominated Western scientific thought [and therefore the Realist novel] for the next two hundred years” (44). Analytico-referential discourse disenchanted the world to better subjugate it and turn it into an extension of the subject: it is because of the way “consciousness converts – by way of knowing – the otherness of everything it encounters into aspects of its own (reconfirmed) self-sameness” (46) that Weinstein speaks of the “ego-logy of realism”. According to him, the consequence of “analytico-referential discourse”, which “can say the world not as it is but as it is known”, is that “[t]hings as they are have departed from the landscape of Western science, not to reappear.” (45).

However, “analytico-referential discourse” is not only responsible for the departure of things, but also for their traumatic “return”. Kien himself reflects on the disenchantment of the world brought about by “analytic-referential discourse”:


You have to know an object by its proper name for it to lose its dangerous magic. Primitive man called each and all by the wrong name. One single and terrible web of magic surrounded him; where and when did he not feel threatened? Knowledge has freed us from superstitions and beliefs. Knowledge makes use always of the same names, preferably Graeco-Latin, and indicates by these names actual things. Misunderstandings are impossible. Who for instance could imagine anything else in a door than the door itself, and, at the uttermost, its shadow. (385)
Yet, the best manner to awaken the disquieting phantasmic shadow of things is precisely to assign labels that seem to exhaust the meaning of those things. By “barricading” himself consciously and wilfully “gegen die Erde ... gegen alles bloß materielle Beziehungswesen, gegen alles nur Planetarische” (67) (“against the world ... against all material relations, against all terrestrial needs”; 67) in his linguistic (symbolic) egotistic ivory tower, Kien makes sure that the repressed “order of things” will return with a vengeance in an uncontrollable and radically phantasmic, spectral way, a true phantasmagoria of memories, dreams and hallucinations. Like those “ghosts” that Kien remembers seeing when, as a child, he was locked in a bookstore where he would end up spending the night: “Gespenster gab es doch. In der Nacht flogen sie alle her und hockten sich über die Bücher. Da lasen sie. Die brauchten kein Licht, die hatten so große Augen ... . Zehntausend Bücher, auf jedem hockte ein Gespenst” (13) (“So there were ghosts. During the night they came flying here and crouched over the books. Then they read. They needed no light, they had such big eyes ... ten thousand books and a ghost crouching over each one”; 15). As Foucault had observed, it is within the four walls of the library that the “fantasy of the library” emerges, eventually setting the library itself – metaphorically – on fire. The fact that Kien and his library literally go up in flames makes the ending of the novel profoundly ambivalent. It is not clear whether this conflagration should be celebrated as a final liberating dissolution of the bond between words and things instituted by the sovereign phallogocentric subject of the Enlightenment; or, whether we run the risk of complacently joining the crowd of curieux assembled around the library on fire, mesmerized by the fascinating spectacle of a whole culture in flames.

33 “[I] [‘un chimérique’] se déploie soigneusement dans la bibliothèque assourdie, avec ses colonnes de livres, ses titres alignés et ses rayons qui la ferment de toute part, mais bâillent de l’autre côté sur des mondes impossibles” (9) “[F]antasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds”; 47).
Disembodying *Wissbegier*

No less than Bouvard and Pécuchet, Peter Kien is undoubtly an anachronistic figure. In *Die Masse der Bücher*, Konrad Kirsch observes: “Kiens >Wissenshaft< nicht einem Wissenshaftsverständnis entspricht, das auf Empirie und heuristischen Modellen basiert, sondern ehe jenem der spätmittelalterlichen Scholastik gleichkommt” (139) (“Kien’s ‘science’ does not so much correspond to the common understanding of science, based on empiric and heuristic models, as to the scholasticism of the late Middle Ages”) (my translation). There is something strikingly anachronistic in Peter Kien’s dogmatic scholasticism and in his ascetic existence as a true monk of learning. Kien caricaturally incarnates that asceticism Nietzsche saw at the heart of the modern pursuit of knowledge. At the same time, in the initial distinction between a high intellectual curiosity and a low distracting curiosity, we see another instance of the way modern science reinstated a split *curiositas*. Not surprisingly Augustine’s notion of *curiositas* turns out to be very relevant to our purpose. Also, because, as Blumenberg has argued in “Light as a metaphor”, Augustine, together with the other Church Fathers, was able to bring together the Greek theoretical tradition, profoundly ocularocentric, and the Biblical tradition, which privileges the Word. I have chosen this particular passage among many in Augustine’s *Confessions* where the subject of *curiosity* is treated, because of the richness and resonance of its imagery:

[I]n how many most petty and contemptible things is our curiosity daily tempted, and how often we give way, who can recount? How often do we begin as if we were tolerating people telling vain stories, lest we offend the weak; then by degrees we take interest therein! I go not now to the circus to see a dog coursing a hare; but in the field, if passing, that coursing peradventure will distract me even from some weighty thought, and draw me after it: not that I turn aside the body of my beast, yet still incline my mind thither. And unless Thou, having made me see my infirmity didst speedily
admonish me either through the sight itself by some contemplation to rise towards Thee, or altogether to despise and pass it by, I dully stand fixed therein. What, when sitting at home, a lizard catching flies, or a spider entangling them rushing into her nets, oft-times takes my attention? Is the thing different, because they are but small creatures? I go on from them to praise Thee the wonderful Creator and Orderer of all, but this does not first draw my attention. It is one thing to rise quickly, another not to fall. And of such things is my life full; and my one hope is Thy wonderful great mercy. For when our heart becomes the receptacle of such things, and is overcharged with throngs of this abundant vanity, then are our prayers also thereby often interrupted and distracted, and whilst in Thy presence we direct the voice of our heart to Thine ears, this so great concern is broken off by the rushing in of I know not what idle thoughts.

For Augustine, idle *curiositas* is a lowly, earthbound lust for the apparently insignificant, chaotic world of particulars; a “bestial” desire – one can find here an echo of the Platonic metaphor of the horse of desire – capable of diverting from the inward contemplation of the divine Light. Augustine’s illumination is described in paradoxically visual terms – inner contemplation and inner light – pointing already to the “flight of the light” described by Hans Blumenberg, in “Light as a Metaphor”, as the process of de-lumination of an originally luminescent Greek cosmos filled with light. If in Plato’s myth of the cave, there was already a turning of the gaze away from the darkness of the cave into the Light above ground, Augustine’s illumination involves a “turning one’s gaze inward” (Blumenberg 45), a true shutting of the physical eyes – and the opening of the soul’s metaphorical eyes. As we have just mentioned, the interest of Augustine is that, following Philo, he is trying to accommodate the Old Testament’s emphasis on the Word and the Law with a fundamentally oculocentric Greek conception of knowledge.

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34 In Augustine, we already see a tension which will resurface in Modernity. Arendt observed that “Since Bergson, the use of the sight metaphor in metaphor has kept dwindling, not unsurprisingly, as emphasis and interest have shifted entirely from contemplation to speech, from nous to logos.” (qtd in Levin 2). In Modernity, there seems to have been a shift “from (the normativity of) seeing to (the normativity of) listening” (Levin 3)
Blumenberg observes that Church fathers tried to harmonize Greek *theoria* (progressively identified to *status gloriae*) with the importance of hearing the Word. Accordingly, we find in Augustine references to both the Voice of God and to his divine Light. Against them, *curiositas* is both the visual distraction of the changing, confusing world of particulars as well as the equally distracting “vain stories” which he is tempted into listen to. Furthermore, long before Freud, Augustine shows the intimate link between the desire to see and the desire to be seen: here again there is a radical opposition between the vain exhibitionist pride of the sinful “curiosity” of the magi and other charlatans seeking social recognition in the eyes’ of men, and the true believer who “performs” for God; in the *Confessions*, God’s eyes are mentioned no less than his Ears, to which men direct their prayers.

Kien’s obsessive desire to know is based on a rejection of that low *curiositas*, lust of the eyes, which Augustine had banned because it diverted from God. Yet, unlike Augustine, Kien’s condemnation of a childish, passive, distracting and dissipating curiosity is not done in the name of divine contemplation, but rather in the name of scholarship and of an obscure intellectual discipline, which far from being contemplative, is driven forward by a very modern, demonic “drive for knowledge”, autonomous and indifferent to the life-world and the all too human quests for meaning or happiness. To defend himself against a distracting *curiositas*, Kien lives like a recluse in his “blind” library with walled-up windows; he could not hope for more than that: “den Besitz einer reichhaltigen, geordneten und nach allen Seiten hin abgeschlossenen Bibliothek, in der ihn kein überflüssiges Möbelstück, kein überflüssiger Mensch von ernsten Gedanken ablenkte” (21) (“a well-stocked library, in perfect order and enclosed on all sides, in which no single superfluous article of furniture, no single superfluous person could lure him from his serious thoughts”; 23). Yet, the quietness of Peter Kien’s library is under constant threat once he marries his maid, Therese. Kien has to face the distracting, intruding presence of Therese.
her furniture, her grotesquely large, starchy blue skirt and her constant babbling. Against this relentless encroaching of the worldly, prosaic reality, Kien will, like Augustine, literally turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. Imitating the window-less library, Kien first discovers the potential of simply shutting his eyes as a “weapon” against the intrusive presence of the new furniture. Yet, this hermetic “hermitage” is not the space of Augustian inner contemplation anymore. It is not that, as Arendt feared, in modernity vita activa has replaced the ideal of vita contemplativa; rather, we also assist to an invasion of the latter by the former: The “service of truth” to which Kien is devoted is not anymore a contemplative beholding of truth, it is rather a continuous making and producing of learning. The “hermitage” is not anymore the place where the inner Light is revealed, but the gloomy place where a once enlightened Wissbegier, now turned into a disembodied yet obscene drive for knowledge can thrive, like a dark, secret vice. We are in one of Foucault’s libraries, “institutions verdâtres où les livres s’accumulent et où croît doucement la lente, la certain vegetation de leur savoir” (11) (“greenish institutions where books are accumulated and where the slow and incontrovertible vegetation of learning quietly proliferates”; 92) – indeed, once Kien regains control of his library through blindness, learning can thrive again: “Die Wissenschaft blühte. Abhandlungen schossen wie Pilze aus dem Schreibtisch” (71) (“Learning flourished. Theses sprouted from the writing desk like mushrooms; 71). Learning does not need anymore the man of learning. This raises a fundamental problem of agency: blindness which appears to Kien as the ultimate expression of a self-possessed subject of Enlightenment turns out to be a way for a self-effacing Kien to leave the scene, recede into the background, so a triumphant learning may flourish unrestrained. Ultimately, his desire to block

35 Rather than as a metaphor for the protagonist of the novel, the library functions almost as a bodily, living extension of Peter Kien. Kien himself compares the library to a living “Organismus”.

36 Yet, as we will see, this proliferation is accompanied by a parallel proliferation of the imaginary, a “plague of fantasies”, in the form of dreams and hallucinations.
out anything “superfluous” will turn into a suicidal, self-annihilating desire to suppress the “excess”, that is, the bodily support of his own demonic epistemological drive.

In this “excess”, we have an instance of that Lacanian objet a, the partial object one has to get rid of in order to become an in-dividual, but which simultaneously reveals the constitutive alienation of the individual. In the case of Kien, it is his own “flesh and blood” existence that is the price to be paid for his strong Charakter, unified and marmoreal – like the stone statue he pretends to become at one point in the story. Yet, this is also what makes the objet a all the more obvious as both cause and object of desire. In other words, the more the body as the support of desire is negated, the more the “picture-perfect” ideal imaginary ego, perfectly closed on itself, will be smirched by the stain of the repressed corporeality. Interestingly, for Lacan, apart from bodily parts, the gaze and the voice are also objects a; as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen puts it in Lacan. Le maître absolu: “L’objet a du fantasme figure le sujet au bord de s’évanouir, suspendu (et ainsi ‘soutenant’ son désir) au bord de la castration : … œil collé au trou de serrure, bouche anorexique refermée sur le rien” (276) [“the object a of phantasy portrays the subject on the verge of disappearing, suspended (as thus ‘propping up’ his desire) on the verge of castration: ... the eye glued to the keyhole, an anorexic mouth closed on nothing”; 234]. As we will see, the hushed and “blinded” environment of both his Privatbibliothek and his own self, figured as the space of our supremely self-possessed, unified and centered Subject of the Enlightenment will be in fact a theatre for the gaze and voice, not of God anymore, but of an alienating Other.

3 Gaze: from Enlightened Wissbegier to blind epistemological drive

How is it possible for an enlightened Wissbegier supposed to shed light on the world to veer into a blind drive for knowledge? We are touching here on one of the most interesting aspects of the contradiction at the heart of the novel’s central motif, the “blinding” or “dazzling”
to which the original title in German, *Die Blendung*, alludes. Rather than a motif, we are confronted here with a theme which regroups a series of motifs – the relation between seeing and knowing (*voir* and *savoir*), fear of blindness, castration anxiety, petrifaction, etc. – with obvious Freudian overtones. This is probably the most striking example of the “heimlichen Dialog mit Freud” ("familiar dialogue with Freud") underlying Canetti’s work. Although we will not address directly the problematic and complex relation between Canetti and Freud’s thought, we will often have to refer to this uninterrupted dialogue.

3.1  *Blindness and insight*

A very Freudian scenario is set up from the beginning: Since a traumatic experience in childhood when he went temporally blind, blindness is Kien’s worst fear. In “Das Unheimliche”, Freud observes that “die Angst zu erblinden, häufig genug ein Ersatz für die Kastrationsangst ist” (254) (“the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated”; 231). Similarly, for Kien, the fear of blindness stands also for the horror of a major loss, that of his library – in the first chapter, he evokes the example of Erathostenes, “der große Bibliothekar von Alexandria” (20) (“the great librarian of Alexandria”; 22), who, realizing he was going blind, decided to starve himself feeling considering “seine Trennung von der Bücher für Blindheit genug” (21) (“that to take leave of his library was blindness enough”; 22). Yet, despite Kien’s fear of blindness, in chapter 5, Kien will close his eyes, affecting a voluntary ‘blindness’:

Beim Waschen schloß Kein vor dem Wasser die Augen. Es war eine alte Gewohnheit von ihm. …Sobald er des Morgens erwachte, freute er sich aufs Waschen. Denn zu welcher andern Zeit war er von den Möbeln frei? Übers Becken gebeugt, sah er keines von der verräterischen Objekten. (Alles, was ihm von der Arbeit ablenkte, war im Grunde

37 Expression by Michael Rohrwasser in “Schreibstrategien: Canettis Beschreibungen von Freud” (159).
Verrat... Es ergab sich von selbst, dass Kien den geschlossenen Augen Lust abgewann. War er mit dem Wachen fertig, so öffnete er sie noch nicht. Eine kleine Weile länger verblieb er in der Phantasie von den plötzlich verschwundenen Möbeln. (70)

When washing, Kien closed his eyes at the touch of water. This was an old custom of his. … On waking that morning, he rejoiced at the thought of washing: For at what other time was he released from the oppression of the furniture? Bending over the basin, he was blind to every one of these traitor objects. (Whatever diverted his attention from his work was fundamentally traitorous.) …. Naturally enough Kien developed a taste for keeping his eyes shut. His washing continued, still he did not open his eyes. For a little longer he continued his blissful fantasy of the vanished furniture. (69-71)

In an interesting reversal of the Oedipus myth, while the latter blinds himself when realizes the horrifying, traumatic dimension of his deeds – to which he had until then remained unwittingly blind – Kien’s self-blinding is a way to prolong the “Phantasie” of an impenetrable bookish fortress in the face of the relentless assaults of a “castrating” Therese and her new furniture. Kien presents his voluntary blindness as a triumph of his Will – “eine Waffe, gegen Zeit und Raum” (72) (“a weapon against time and space”; 71). In “Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight”, Shoshana Felman remarks that “Oedipus the King’s ultimate self-recognition amount[s] to the self-denial and self-appropriation inherent paradoxically in the final gesture of self-blinding” (140-1). Although touted as an act of self-appropriation, Kien’s self-blinding is first and foremost a gesture of (self-)denial. Indeed, Donahue likens Kien’s “self-blinding” with his “self-mutilation” towards the end of the novel to “the famous mutilations of Abelard and Origen, who only escaped the snares of (female) material reality – and were thus free to continue their meditative lifestyle – by means of castration” (86).

In The Mind of Modernism, James McFarlane regards Kien’s blindness as a form of Tiresian penetrating “seeing-blindness” characteristic of Modernism. The “full visionary power
of blindness” consists in its ability to “make possible juxtapositions which would be impossible if the objects could see each other” (McFarlane 91). McFarlane concludes: “Blindness becomes the means wherewith to come to terms with life. ... [S]uch blindness yields much more reliable testimony about the real meaning of life than does the report of witnesses enjoying conventional good sight” (92). The problem with this reading is that it buys into Kien’s *Philosophie der Blindheit*. It is highly problematic to argue that Kien’s voluntary blindness to his surroundings and to other human beings might in fact yield a privileged insight into the “meaning of life”; especially because he avowedly uses blindness as a defence mechanism; as he puts it to justify himself: “Er ist sein Recht, die Blindheit, die ihn vor solchen Sinnesexzessen schützt, auf alle störenden Elemente in seinem Leben zu übertragen” (72) (“It is his right to apply that blindness, which protects him from the excesses of the senses, to every disturbing element in his life”; 71). While Oedipus through his self-blinding is finally able to recognise himself in Tiresias’s “seeing blindness”, Kien’s fate is the opposite of that of the blind man in the street in whom he fails to recognize himself at the beginning of the story; this lowlife, lewd beggar is the true *alter ego*, inverted mirror image of our lofty, prudish, scholar; Kien suspects rightly that, as we will learn later on, the blind man is in fact a fraud affecting the same self-serving blindness which will “affect” Kien himself.

Kien uses blindness to seek refuge in “Phantasie” and escape a “reality” which, as a result, appears in its increasingly traumatic dimension. This is especially obvious when Kien tries to prolong these fantasies to the point of actually believing in them. A case in point is the wish-fulfilling fantasy of Therese’s death which comes to replace in his psychic reality his own real expulsion from the library. Thus, when Kien is finally confronted to Therese’s real presence in the police station, he thinks he is suffering from “hallucinations” (302):
‘Stellen wir den Tatbestand fest, ich will Ihnen die Hilfe erleichtern. Ich sehe Sie alle, Sie sehen mich. Genau so steht die Ermordete neben mir. Alle meine Sinne haben mir verlassen, nicht nur die Augen. Ich kann tun, was ich will, ich höre den Rock, ich fühle ihn, er riecht nach Stärke ... helfen Sie mir! Beweisen Sie mir, daß sie tot ist!’ (333)

Let us first clear in our facts; I will make your task of helping me easier. I see you all, you see me. Even so clearly, the murdered woman stands at my side. All my senses have betrayed me, not my eyes alone. Do as I will, I hear the crackling of her skirt, I can feel it, it smells of starch. ... I implore your help! Prove to me that she is dead. (303)

For Kien, the experience of “reality” is completely mediated by his fantasies; since he has fantasized her death, she must be dead and her real presence is nothing more than the ghostly apparition of a “spectral Therese” (Schein-Therese). Later on, Kien reasons:

 Dann zwinge man sich, die Wirklichkeit ins Auge zu fassen und suche sie nach der Halluzination ab. Findet sie sich irgendwo in der realen Welt, so wisse man, daß man verrückt ist, und begebe sich in fachkundige Pflege. Findet sich der blaue Rock nirgendwo, so hat man ihn überwunden. Wer Wirklichkeit und Einbildung noch zu scheiden vermag, ist seiner geistigen Kräfte sicher. (420)

[Real]eity must be faced and searched for the hallucination. If the hallucination is to be found anywhere in the physical world, it is then evident that you have gone mad and must undergo proper treatment. But if the blue skirt is nowhere to be found then it has been vanquished. He who is still able to distinguish between reality and imagination is sure of his mental balance” (381)

There is in the Die Blendenung a parodic inversion of the Enlightenment narrative of a Will to know dispelling superstitious fantasies so as to shed light on the “real” world. For Peter Kien, dwelling in the “Phantasie” of his hermetic intellectual universe, reality itself can only appear as an undesirable hallucination, a nightmare. As we will see, the Kantian rallying cry for the
Enlightenment, “Sapere Audere!” (“dare to know!”), has degenerated into Peter Kien’s blind, compulsive Wissbegier, senseless and exclusivist injunction to work and produce knowledge – an injunction which can also ironically be traced back to Kant’s categorical imperative.

3.2  **Dazzling Enlightenment**

McFarlane’s problematic recuperation of Kien’s voluntary blindness as a sort of Modernist “visionary blindness” hero is characteristic of a certain criticism less attuned to what Hollinger dubs the “cognitivist” dimension of Modernism. For, Peter Kien demonstrates a blind confidence in the power of the intellect: Encouraged by the results of his willed blindness, the protagonist of Canetti’s novel triumphantly concludes with a praise of the “light” of the intellect: “Blindheit ist eine Waffe, gegen Zeit und Raum; unser Dasein eine einzige, ungeheuerliche Blindheit, bis auf das Wenige, das wir durch unsere kleinlichen Sinne – kleinlich ihrem Wesen wie ihrer Reichweite nach – erfahren” (72) (“Blindness is a weapon against time and space; our being is one vast blindness, save only for that little circle which our mean intelligence can illuminate. The dominating element of the universe is blindness”; 71). Rather than a Modernist mystical visionary, Kien is a caricature of the sovereign subject of the Enlightenment, dazzled – and truly blinded – by the Lumières – the “little circle which our mean intelligence can illuminate.” Although, as we have mentioned, our “man of learning” might evoke an anachronistic scholasticism that has little to do with modern Wissenschaftler, it is important to remember that scholarship is in German a branch of “Wissenschaft”, and that Kien incarnates the Hollinger’s ideal figure of the “Knower” in its modern, professionalized and specialized form. In Kien’s depiction of a blind universe, we seem to have reached the end of Blumenberg’s “flight of the light”, the process of de-lumination from the naturally luminescent Greek cosmos where truth was self-presenting to our modern, obscure universe, which can only be understood and acquire
meaning thanks to the “luminary of the human mind” (Blumenberg, “Light” 51); in this context, Kien’s dazzling would then be the consequence of an epistemological hubris, a blind faith in man’s cognitive capabilities, blind also to the moral and ethical dimension of this demonic pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake.

The motif of blindness is inextricably linked to the “Blendung” or “dazzling” to which the novel’s title alludes. The most obvious reference is certainly to Plato’s myth of the cave. In “Light as a Metaphor for Truth”, Blumenberg argues that the allegory of the dazzling sun in the Platonic myth of the cave marks the beginning of the process of de-lumination of the world, for it already suggests the transcendency of light which will be dominant in Hellenic thought. The original “brightness that fills the cosmos like a medium is withdrawn, concentrated, objectified as a metaphysical pole” (34). It is because of this transcendent concentration that the light is now dazzling:

Light, now otherworldly and pure, does not allow for theoretical lingering in joyful contemplation; it demands extraordinary, ecstatic attention, in which fulfilling contact and repellent dazzling become one. Few are equal to this task. The deadly light must be made available to mortals in the more cautious dosages of the photismos of mysteries. (34)

Kien’s blindness would then be the result of an overexposure to the dazzling (and burning) light of the divine realm of Ideas. In fact, Peter Kien, who will perish in the fire of his library, shares in the epistemological hubris of an Icarus or a Phaeton, who got too close to the divine Light and forgot that they did not belong in that proximity.

However, as Korand Kirsch has remarked, it is not clear whether the library that opens up to the skies above functions as a sort of “Ideenhimmel”, a stable, ordered microcosmos perfectly mirroring the eternal immutability of the macrocosmos above, or whether the windowless library
is in fact the true Platonic cave and books are mere shadows, imperfect, material copies of eternal, immaterial ideas. Yet, as Heidegger points out in “Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit”, what’s essential in Plato’s allegory are the “die erzählten Übergänge und der Aufstieg aus dem Bezirk des künstlichen Feuerscheins in die Helle des Sonnenlichtes, insgleichen der Rückstieg von der Quelle alles Lichtes zurück in das Dunkel der Höhle” (130) (“movements of passage, both the ascent from the realm of the man-made fire into the brightness of the sunlight as well as the descent from the source of all light into the darkness of the cave”; 172). It is important to remember that the allegory does not end with the ascent to the Light but with the return to darkness of the cave. This explains the fundamental ambivalence of the “dazzling” in Plato’s allegory. The “Blendung” provoked by the contemplation of the glorious Truth immediately after leaving the darkness of the cave is mirrored by the dazzling confusion the philosopher experiences when returning to the obscurity of the cave, a confusion which seems ridiculously amusing to the dwellers of the cave – just as the Thracian maid is amused by Thales’s fall into the well.

It is this allegorical narrative of ascension and “illumination”, and ulterior return to the cave to “enlighten” and free humanity that Canetti parodies and inverts. The first part, “Ein Kopf ohne Welt” (“A Head without a world”), begins with Kien in his library, from which he will eventually be expelled. In the second part, “Kopflose Welt” (Headless World”), Kien who has been wandering and roaming Vienna’s underbelly is happy to find the “ideal Himmel”, which turns out to be an underground seedy tavern whose ceiling displays painted stars and where he will meet his famulus, Fischerle, the hunchback swindler. Misled by the name of the tavern, Kien enters the tavern in a scene of Platonic overtones:
Er richtete den Blick auf die Firmenschilder ringsum, ein Stück Stadt, für das er sonst blind war, und las ‘Zum idealen Himmel’. Da trat mir Vergnügen ein. Er schlug die dicken Vorhänge zurück. Ein entsetzlicher Dunst benahm ihm den Atem. ... Seine Augen tränten; er riß sie weit auf, um zu sehen. Da tränten sie noch mehr und er sah nichts. Eine schwarze Gestalt eskortierte ihn an einen kleinen Tisch .... Die Gestalt bestellte für ihn einen Doppelmokka und verschwand im Nebel. ... Der Nebel teilte sich. Kein folgte mit argwöhnischem Blick der Gestalt, die lang und hager war wie er selbst. Vor einem Büffet machte sie halt, drehte sich um und wies mit ausgestrecktem Arm auf den Gast. Sie sagte einige unverständliche Worte und schüttelte sich vor Lachen. (188)

He turned his eyes to the names above the doors, a feature of the town to which he was otherwise blind, and read The Stars of Heaven. He entered with pleasure. He thrust back the thick curtains over the door. An appalling fog almost took his breath away. ... His eyes watered: he opened them wide to see. They watered more and he could see nothing. A black figure escorted him to a small table ... The figure ordered him a large black coffee and disappeared in the fog ... Kien’s glance followed the figure, long and thin as he was himself, with distrust. It came to a halt in front of the bar, turned itself round and indicated with an outstretched arm the newcomer. It said some incomprehensible words and shook with laughter. (173-4)

This farcical scene hardly qualifies as a “return to the cave”. Firstly, it is certainly not voluntary; he has been expelled from his library, his own private “Ideenhimmel”, where he did not tolerate any intrusion from the “mass of illiterates”; his contempt has remained intact. Therefore, unlike Plato’s philosopher, Kien’s elitist and arrogant way to look down on the crowd he despises is hardly endearing. It is therefore difficult not to read Die Blendung as a satire of a certain intellectual hubris latent in Plato’s myth of cave³⁸.

³⁸ Yet, I would not go as far as reading it as “anti-Platonische Roman” (Kirsch). The target of Canetti seems to be here a grotesque form of Platonic idealism of which there are many hilarious instances in the novel: thus, for instance, Kien is happy to recognize pigeons from their characteristic cooing – “‘Stimmt!’ sagte er leise und nickte, wie immer, wenn eine Wirklichkeit ihrem Urbild im Druck entsprach” (129) (“Quite so! He said softly, and nodded as he always did when he found reality bearing out the printed original”; 123); similarly, it is only because he knows...
Canetti’s variation on the myth of the cave also exposes what Bourdieu calls the intellectual habitus. According to Heidegger, in his allegory of the cave, Plato accomplishes a revolutionary transformation of the notion of truth: not anymore aletheia or unhiddenness, now “Wahrheit wird zur ὑπερθότης, zur Richtigkeit des Vernehmens und Aussagens” (136) (“Truth becomes orthotes, the correctness of apprehending and asserting”; 177). The result is that truth ceases to be the property of things and becomes an “Auszeichnung des menschlichen Verhaltens zum Seienden (137) (“a characteristic of human comportment towards beings”; 177). Truth is now about turning away from the comfortable and familiar darkness of the cave, where shadows are taken for the unmediated reality and the things themselves. The ideas can only be seen by painfully turning around. The essence of paideia is precisely this getting “accustomed” and “reoriented”, “movement of passage”: “παιδεία meint die Unwendung des ganzen Menschen im Sinne der eingewöhnenden Versetzung aus dem Bezirk des zunächst Begegnenden in einen anderen Bereich, darin das Seiende erscheint“ (124) “Paideia means turning around the whole human being. It means removing human beings from the region where they first encounter things and transferring and accustoming them to another realm where things appear” (168). The risk is that for the trained mind, for whom this “accustoming” has become a second nature – a habitus for Bourdieu –, this turning away can take the form of true escapism: Kien’s blindness is indeed a narcissistic turning inward into the familiar comfort of his own library, a realm not of shining

the “printed original” that he recognizes roses: “Er nahm die Rosen aus Fischerles Hand, entsann sich ihres Wohlgeruches, den er aus persischen Liebesgedichten kannte, und näherte sie seinen Augen, richtig, zu rochen” (268) (“He took the roses from Fischerle’s hand, remembered their sweet smell which he knew from Persian love poetry, and raised them to his eyes; it was true they did smell”; 246). But the “printed original” is as much a Platonic idea as Kien’s private library an Ideenhimmel; books are in fact copies of copies and the private library is a cave, a prison-house isolated from the world. The return to the cave is not only the moral duty of the philosopher, it is a reminder that his station is not in the realm of ideas in the first place, and that the moment he thinks he is in their presence, he is merely clutching at mere shadows, second-hand copies.
ideas but of pale idols, and therefore not that different from the cave, the world of prejudices and superstitions. At the same time, this *habitus* involves a certain disciplinary violence of which Kien’s voluntary blindness is a caricatural example. More relevant to our argument is how this form of violence underlying the turning around is intimately linked to the space of desire opened by an allegory that emphasizes the “striving for truth” and the “Übergänge aus einem Aufenthalt in den anderen” (Heidegger 125) (“movement of passage ... from one dwelling place to another”; 167).

Heidegger also makes a connection between the Greek *paideia* and the German *Bildung*, thus emphasizing the formative and educational dimension of Plato’s allegory: in the ideal of *Bildung*, rather than the risible, inadequate philosopher who returns to the cave, we have a “formed” individual in harmony with his surrounding (social) world; the harmony is possible because the “formed” individual is in fact “shaped” by his environment. Heidegger remarks: “Bildung ist einmal ein Bilden im Sinne der entfaltenden Prägung. Dieses »Bilden« aber »bildet« (prägt) zugleich aus der vorgreifenden Anmessung an einen maßgebenden Anblick, der deshalb das Vor-Bild heißt” (123) (“On the one hand formation means forming someone in the sense of impressing on him a character that unfolds. But at the same time this ‘forming’ of someone ‘forms’ (or impresses a character on) somebody by antecedently taking measure in terms of some paradigmatic image, which for that reason is called the proto-type”; 166). According to Donahue, Kien is modelled as a caricature of the self-insulating tendencies of Fritz K. Ringer’s “mandarin intellectuals” and of an anachronistic “backward looking *Bildungsbürgertum*, which witnessed the eclipse of its own relevance and yearned for the return of the more secure days of yore” (103). *Die Blendung* is therefore a “negative Bildungsroman”, like *Bouvard*, the de-formation of a “man of learning” in his forties, the relentless process of fragmentation and dissolution of his strong *Charakter* and of the edifice of *Bildung*. 
3.3 **Dazzling things**

There is yet another dimension to the dazzling experienced by Kien; for, he is not so much dazzled by the obscurity reigning in the “lower” world of the cave, as mystified by the true radiance of the things themselves. It is important to remember that Kien’s voluntary blindness is a reaction to the “dazzling” intrusion of furniture in his library. As the title of the chapter, “Blendende Möbel” (“Dazzling furniture”), bears out, it is the furniture itself which, in its unbearable proximity, having penetrated the hermitage of the walled-up library, is truly dazzling. As the incarnation of the encroaching and threatening intrusion of reality and the world of things, Therese becomes a true Medusa figure. Indeed, Medusa encapsulates the two mirroring “dazzlings” in *Die Blendung*: on the one hand, her head has often been regarded as a solar symbol, an incarnation of an awe-inspiring Ideal or Truth which the philosopher cannot look directly in the eyes; but, on the other hand, it can also be related to the Lacanian motif of coming “too close to the Thing” (Žižek, Fantasy 88), to absolute Otherness. In *Méduse. Contribution à une anthropologie des arts du visuel*, Jean Clair observes: “Dans les moments de trouble, d’inquiétude, de désarroi ce n’est plus l’homme qui regarde et qui l’ordonne, c’est la nature, en tant que radicalement autre que l’homme, qui le regarde et qui le pétrifie” (qtd. in Le Rider, *Modernité* 388) (“In times of disturbance, anxiety and confusion, it is no longer man who looks on nature and commands her, it is nature, as being radically other than man, who looks on him and turns him into stone”; qtd in 332). Le Rider mentions one of the mythological scenes chosen by Klimt to feature in the poster for the first exhibition of the ‘Secession’ in 1898. In it, we have “une Athéna guerrière, casquée, armée d’une lance et d’un bouclier orné d’une tête de Méduse archaïque” (*Modernité* 180) (“warlike, helmeted Athena, armed with a lance and a shield bearing an archaic head of Medusa”; 150). Le Rider then reminds the reader:
À l'origine, elle est toute proche de la Méduse. La tête de Gorgone, avec laquelle Athéna, selon les sources les plus anciennes, effraie ses adversaires, aurait été à l'origine sa propre tête. Plus tard, seulement, lorsqu’elle connaît dans son aspect extérieur et dans son caractère la métamorphose proprement hellénique au terme de laquelle elle devient une divinité de l’Olympe, son aspect de Gorgone terrifiante se voit dissocié d’elle pour lui être opposé comme un principe antagoniste, destiné à être vaincu. (181)

Originally she was very close to Medusa. The Gorgon’s head which Athene, in the earliest sources, uses to frighten her enemies may originally have been her own. Only later, when her outward appearance and her character underwent the Hellenic metamorphosis which turned her into an Olympian deity, did her terrifying Gorgon aspect become dissociated from her and was opposed to her as an antagonistic principle doomed to defeat. (150)

Therese is not so much the incarnation of solar Truth as the return of the repressed, primitive chthonian deity which inspires the horror of feminine sexuality. Kien married Therese because he mistook her for a providential maternal “foster-mother” for his library. Yet, in their wedding night, Kien trespasses this phantasmic screen, he “gets too close”, sees her naked and is exposed to her sexual appetite. He flees and bolts himself not in the library, his “hermitage”, but in the “Klosett, dem einzigen bücherfreien Raum der Wohnung” (59) (“lavatory, the only room in the whole house where there were no books”; 59) and where, defenceless, without his armour of learning, he “zieht sich ... mechanisch die Hosen herunter, setz sich aufs Breet und weint wie ein kleines Kind” (“automatically let his trousers down, took his place on the seat and cried like a child”; 59).

Like the Gorgon, Therese incarnates “le principe matriarchal de la Loi de la Mère concurrente de la Loi du Père, l’idée d’une féminisation de la culture dans la modernité et de la déconstruction des valeurs masculines” (Le Rider, Modernité 182) (“the matriarchal principle of
the law of the mother in its challenge to the law of the father, the idea of a feminization of
culture and the deconstruction of feminine values”; 151). This motif so dear to Vienna’s fin-de-
siècle and characteristic of what Le Rider dubs the “crisis of masculine identity” could be traced
back to Sex and Character in which Otto Weininger “entreprend ... de lutter sans relâche contre
tout ce qu’il trouve de fêminin dans la culture et dans lui-même” (95) (“vowed himself to
struggle unremittingly against everything feminine he found in culture and in himself”; 79). As
has been remarked, it is difficult not to see a caricature of Weininger in Kien’s fear of the
“feminine” as a corrosive agent threatening to dissolve even the strongest “man of character”
(437) and undermine the edifice of Bildung and Kultur. This clash is farcically figured in the
passage where beaten up by his wife, Peter Kien tries to escape his miserable (present) reality by
seeking refuge in the past, in the tradition which he and his library stand for:

Er beugt sich vor dem Primat der Vergangenheit. ... Gott ist die Vergangenheit. ... Eine
Zeit wird kommen, da die Menschen ihre Sinne zu Erinnerung und alle Zeit zu
Vergangenheit umschmieden werden. Eine Zeit wird kommen, da eine einzige
Vergangenheit alle Menschen umspannt, da nichts ist außer der Vergangenheit, da jeder
glaubt: an die Vergangenheit. (170)

He bowed before the supremacy of the past. ... God is the past. ... A time will come
when men will beat their senses into recollections, and all time into the past. A time will come when a single past will embrace all men, when there will be nothing except the past, when everyone will have one faith – the past. (158)

The library is the monumental form, erected and unyielding, that the “past” takes. In his attempt
to embody himself the library, Kien develops a “new art”, “petrification”. Interestingly,
petrification, like blindness, is first presented as an achievement of his will; yet, later on,
recounting the episode, Kien presents himself as more of a passive victim: “Wochenlang mußte
ich, aus Furcht vor einer Plünderung meiner Manuskripte , zur Wächterstatue erstarrt” (347)
(“weeks [he] had to live, for fear that she would steal [his] manuscripts, petrified into a guardian-statue”; 316). In his famous notice on the Medusa, “Das Medusenhaupt”, Freud links the petrifying terror induced by Medusa to the horror of female genitalia and castration anxiety. But, simultaneously, “das Starrwerden bedeutet die Erektion” (47) (“becoming stiff means an erection”; 273), a reassurance for the observer that “[e]r hat noch einen Penis” (47) (“he is still in possession of a penis”; 273). A straightforward Freudian reading is here very tempting but almost too obvious and somewhat flat: we could ascribe to castration anxiety Kien’s fear of being amputated of his library – often likened to a “living organism” – a fear that becomes very real when he is evicted from his apartment right after his petrifaction stratagem fails completely; similarly, Therese’s coveting of the books and the library, the biggest private library in the city, could be seen as form of “penis envy”: Therese and the illiterate masses coveting Kien’s impressive *Kultur* and *Bildung*.

Lacan’s notion of the phallus – the signifier that masks an absence – encapsulates the contradiction of petrifaction as both the consequence of castration anxiety and a sort of assertive reaction to it. The phallus cannot be owned because it is literally nothing, a marker for the missing object of desire. Driven out of his library, Kien cannot find solace in his own immaterial *Kopfbibliothek* – his mental library – its ghostly nature is suddenly revealed to him and, as a result, Kien’s greed for “material” books is exacerbated: only in its material, reified form can culture and knowledge be privately owned. Gadamer remarked in his *Lob der Theorie* (*Praise of Theory*) that theory is a “good” belonging to a particular kind of goods:

[E]s gibt andere Güter, die nicht von der Art sind, daß sie, wenn sie dem einen gehören, keinem anderen gehören können. Ja, sind sie sogar von der Art, daß sie keinem gehören und gerade dadurch für einen jeden etwas sind, woran er ganz teil hat. Augustinus gebraucht für diesen Unterschied im >Haben< eines Gutes den Gegensatz des *uti* und
frui, des Brauchens und Verbrauchens und des Umgangs, der seine Frucht in sich selbst trägt. Für Augustin war letztres die auf Gott gerichtete Kontemplation – das weltgerichtete Wissensverlangen verurteilte er als Neugier. Aber auch alle anderen Weisen, in denen der Mensch vom Blick auf das Nützliche sich löst und sich >rein theoretisch< verhält, alle Bereiche, die wir Kunst und Wissenschaft nennen, aber gewiß nicht nur sie, gehören hierher. (48)

[T]here are goods of another kind, whose belonging to one person does not prevent their belonging to others. These actually belong to nobody, and for just that reason they are something in which each individual has a full share. To distinguish the two ways of ‘having’ a good, Augustine used the opposition of uti and frui, of making use of something and using it up, by contrast to dealing with something in a way that bears its own fruit. What was most important to Augustine was contemplation directed toward God; he condemned the desire for worldly knowledge as curiosity. But all the other ways we resist looking only for the useful and behave ‘purely theoretically,’ all the areas we call art and science (but certainly not just those), belong here too. (32)

The example of Kien exposes the hidden foundation of the disinterested intellectual realm: “purely theoretical”, disinterested, behaviour can only take place already from the privileged position of the intellectual, which grants access in the first place to these goods that supposedly “belong to nobody”; we are confronted here with what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital” and Die Blendung exposes its hidden foundation. For, expelled from his library, Kien becomes aware of the immaterial, ultimately illusive, nature of symbolic capital without any kind of legitimating material support. His greed for real books is then accentuated, but appears to him again as disinterested. The books he buys at the Theresianum – the public pawn-brokering establishment – are part of a mission to “save” books, as a true “saint” extending Christian Love from “die Unmenschen, die ihre Bücher aus Geldgier herbringen” (224) (“the abandoned creatures who bring their books here [to the Theresianum] out of greed for filthy lucre”; 206) to the innocent
and defenceless books themselves. Yet, it is Kien’s own greed for knowledge that finds its literal manifestation.

For Lacan, the problem with the phallus is not so much a question of having it, but rather of being it. Like the other images of Kien’s body, the “skeleton”, the “flagpole”, the “knife” – all cold, fleshless, “dead” – the stone statue Kien wants to become stands as a projection of his fixed and unified ego, his Charakter, erected, monolithic – pointing, moreover, to a stagnant, static, mummified culture. Kien’s statuesque ego should be read as being the “phallus”. As Borch-Jacobsen writes: “[L]e phallus est certes ce que l’homme veut être (un moi de marbre un objet sans faille ni ‘trou’, une belle totalité close sur elle-même). Mais il est aussi, et du même coup, ce que l’homme veut être, au sens précis où il ne l’est pas, où il n’est aucun objet « en-soi », aucun ego transcendant” (260) [The phallus is certainly what man wants to be (an ego of bronze, an object without lack or ‘hole’, a beautiful totality closed on itself); but it is also, and by the same token, what man wants to be, in the very precise sense of his not being it, of his not being any object ‘in-itself’, no transcendent ego”). It is impossible to be the phallus: Kien’s fails to turn into stone – “Er ist kein Stein. Da sie nicht zerbricht, zerbricht seine Kunst” (178) (“He was not a stone. Since she did not break in pieces, his art did”; 165). The identification to one unified mirror image cannot be completed. It is the very physical body itself that prevents this imaginary identification from happening.

Kien also embodies that “phallic gaze”, which Peter Brooks in Body Works: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative defines as “hard and appropriative, denuding and violative” (Brooks, Body 98). This phallic gaze is associated with phallogocentric knowledge. Feminist scholars have stressed that the emphasis in the Western tradition on knowledge and vision – voir and savoir – is based on a gendered distribution of roles: a “phallic gaze”, masculine and active,
trying to unveil a feminised and eroticised Truth – in their passivity, women connote, as Laura Mulvey puts it, “to-be-looked-at-ness” (101). In Die Blendung, Canetti stages a farcical version of this fundamental epistemological phantasmic scenario, of what Sartre dubs the Actaeon complex: “One pulls off the veil of nature, one unveils it ...; any research always involves the idea of nudity that one exposes by putting aside the obstacles that cover it, as Actaeon pushes aside the branches the better to see Diana at her bath” (qtd in Brooks 96). From his wedding night, the idea of undressing Therese and taking off her starched blue skirt terrifies Kien. His fetishist dread of Therese’s blue skirt will eventually precipitate his fall into madness. Early in the novel, he compares the skirt to a mussel “shell” he found at the seaside as a child and whose secret he had wanted to pierce. Finally he had crushed it with his shoes: “Bald lag sie splitternackt vor ihm da, ein Häuflein Elend, Schleim und Schwindel und überhaupt kein Tier” (54) (“the stark naked creature on the ground, a miserable fleck of fraudulent slime, not an animal at all”; 54). Under the shell was not an eroticised vision of Truth, phantasm on which the gaze can lose itself in contemplation, but the unendurable, petrifying, Thing of pure jouissance which Kien will try henceforth to deny: “Therese ohne Schale – ohne Rock existierte nicht” (54) (“Therese without her shell – without her dress – did not exist”; 54). Rather than a product of the feminisation and erotisation of Truth, Therese embodies not so much the beautiful and fetishized sight of a naked Goddess Diana, but the mysterious awe-inspiring Sphinx, a truly dazzling, castrating Medusa, the Truth Kien does not want to look in the eyes, but which nonetheless stares threateningly at him.
It is in the petrifaction episode that Kien’s body will become for a moment the object of his own “phallic gaze” by virtue of which he had been invisible until then:\(^{39}\):


His eyes, apparently fixed on nothingness, were examining the details of his body. He regretted that he knew himself so little. The picture which he had of his body was scanty. He wished that he had a looking-glass on the writing desk. He would have liked to pry under the skin of his clothing. Had he acted according to his present thirst for knowledge, he would have undressed stark naked and reviewed his body in detail, inspecting and encouraging it bone by bone. Ah, he suspected a great number of secret corners, hard pointed angles and edges! His bruises were as good a mirror. (160)

Kien sees in his body nothing but the stony skeleton made of “bones” with its “pointed angles and edges”, yet he also becomes aware of the painful presence of his bruised and aching body, a very different kind of “mirror”; the bruises are like stains of the “Real” that blur his statuesque mirror image. Just like the intruding furniture “mutilated” the “living body” (“Organismus”) of the library, Kien’s bruises can in fact be regarded as the “thing” – the famous Lacanian object a – that “incarne et image ultimement la division du sujet, la brisure de l’image, la coupure de la castration” (Borch-Jacobsen 272) (“embodies and ultimately images the division of the subject,

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\(^{39}\) According to Peter Brooks, “the male body is veiled from inquiry, taken as an agent and not the object of knowing” (Brooks, Body 15).
the break in the image, the cut of castration”; 230). In fact, as the “Real”, as that which resists symbolization, Kien’s bruises are consubstantial with Therese’s enormous blue skirt, inassimilable remainder of all of Kien’s attempts to inscribe, to textualize Therese, so as to better write her off. The skirt, as a metonymical figure of Therese’s herself, is therefore the true projection of Kien’s disavowed corporality. We see this intimate relation between Kien and Therese brilliantly figured in one of Kien’s recurrent dreams:

Manchmal stieß er träumend so lang an ihren Rock, bis sie hinfiel. Unter ihren Füßen zog er ihn weg. Eine Schere war plötzlich bei der Hand und er zerschnitt ihn in ganz kleine Stücke. ... Dann schüttete er einen Sack voll kleiner blauer Lappen über Therese aus. ... Der Wind trieb sie von ihr fort, auf ihn, sie hängten sich an ihn, er spürte sie, die blauen Beulen, am ganzen Körper und stöhnte laut auf. (167)

Sometimes in his dreams he beat against her skirt until she fell down. He pulled it off over her feet. Suddenly he had a pair of scissors in his hands and cut it up into tiny pieces. ... Then he emptied out a whole sack of little blue rags over Therese. ... The wind blew them away from her and on to him; they settled on him, he felt them, blue bruises, all over his body, and moaned out loud. (155)

Therese offers in fact a sort of unavowed mirror image of Kien: “merveilleux miroir brisé, brouillé, opaque, où le sujet peut se voir tel qu’il n’est pas et s’identifier dans son absence d’identité. Merveilleuse tête de Méduse, merveilleuse aletheia du sujet” (Borch-Jacobsen 274) ("marvellous broken mirror, muddy and opaque, in which the subject can see itself as he is not and with which he can identify himself in his absence of identity: a marvellous Medusa head, marvellous alētheia of the subject”; 232).

This intimate connection is further stressed in Kien’s fantasy about Therese’s death. A fantasy that he ends up believing and that he recounts to the police. According to his phantasmic scenario, after the petrifaction episode – when Kien was expelled from the library – Therese
devoured herself and he found her dead: “Er fand sie in ihrem Rock, ein abstoßendes, übelriechendes, häßliches Skelett, tot, vollkommen tot, keine Sekunde zweifelte er an ihrem Tod” (348) (“He found her in her skirt, a repellent, evil-smelling, hideous skeleton, dead, completely dead, not for one moment did he doubt her death”; 317). Horror-struck by what looks like Therese at the police station, Kien concludes that he is prey to hallucinations, reasoning:

Von scheintoten Skeletten hingegen ist mir nichts bekannt. Sie urältesten Zeiten stellt sich das Volk die Gespenster als Skelette vor. In dieser Anschauung liegt Tiefe und Größe; auch sie ist beweiskräftig. … Das Skelett, als Bild des Gespenstes, wurde für unzählige Völker zum Inbegriff des Todes. Seine Beweiskraft ist vernichtend, es ist das schlechthin Toteste, das wir kennen. Uralte Gräber jagen uns Schauer über den Leib, wenn sie Skelette enthalten … . Und bezeichnen wir einen durchaus lebenden Menschen als Skelett, so meinen wir damit: er ist dem Tode nahe. (349)

I know of no occasion where apparent, but not actual death has been proved in the case of a skeleton. From the remotest times popular superstition has represented ghosts in the form of skeletons. This conception is at once profound and significant; it is also important evidence. ... The skeleton, as the conception of the ghost, became for countless people the symbol of death. The evidence is therefore overwhelming; the skeleton is the more irrecoverably dead of all the forms we know. Ancient burial places suffuse us with a shudder of disgust if they contain skeletons. ... And if we apply the term ‘skeleton’ to a living being, we mean no less than that he is near to death. (317)

The irony here is that Kien, who has been starving himself, is described as an “ekelhaften Menschen” (327) (“repulsive person; 298) and compared to “hilflose Skelett” (327) (“helpless skeleton”; 298), “lange Nichts” (327) (“a lanky nothing”; 298) by the policemen at the station.

The truth concealed by Therese’s blue skirt is therefore a truth about Kien himself, not only about his own denied corporeality, but also about his own monstrous, all-devouring drive for knowledge, which we see figured in the bloodhounds of his phantasmic scenario about Therese’s
death. Once Therese’s body has been reduced to a skeleton, he imagines the last remains of Therese and, especially, her skirt finally annihilated by bloodhounds: “Nur ein Fleischerhund ließ nicht locker. Er suchte Fleisch, er fand keines. Aus Wut riß er den Sarg zu Boden und zerbiß den blauen Rock in ganz kleine Stücke. Diese fraß er, erbarmungslos, bis auf den letzten Rest. So kommt es, daß der Rock nicht mehr existiert. Sie werden ihn vergeblich suchen” (350) (“[A] bloodhound would not let go. He sought for flesh, but found none. Enraged, he tore the coffin to the ground and bit the blue skirt into small fragments. These he devoured, without pity, to the last morsel. Thus it is that the skirt no longer exists. You will seek it in vain”; 318). This absolute annihilation of the skirt speaks to his phantasm to regain his library in its lost unity. The bloodhounds of his dream are reminiscent of Actaeon’s hunting dogs which end up turning against him, chasing and devouring him once Diana has turned him into a stag. Sartre’s Actaeon complex does not consider one of the invariant elements of the myth, the reversal of roles at the end, from hunter to prey, from persecutor to persecuted. Our philologist, who “wie ein Jäger, das Auge gespannt, erregt, aber kalt, pirschte er sich von Satz zu Satz” (69) (“as a hunter, his eye alert, eager yet cool, he picked his way from phrase to phrase”; 68), finds himself invariably in the position of the hunted, chased from his library and prey to hallucinatory persecution mania.

4 The voice of knowledge

Beset by the two complementary “dazzlings” that we have analysed, Socrates observes in Plato’s *Phaedo*:

[A]s people may injure their bodily eye by observing and gazing on the sun during an eclipse, unless they take the precaution of only looking at the image reflected in the water, or in some similar medium. So in my own case, I was afraid that my soul might be blinded altogether if I looked at things with my eyes or tried to apprehend them by the help of the senses. (69)
We have here, already within the Platonic school itself, the transition from the myth of the cave’s seeing *theoria* to a sceptical *epoché*, bracketing off, shutting out the world, as a defence mechanism against the “dazzling immediacy” of things (Blumenberg 35). Likewise, Kien’s blindness seems to be a desperate defence mechanism to keep the world at a safe distance once the walls of his hermitage can no longer offer any protection. However, it is important to remember that Socrates was not a skeptic: between a dazzling “solar” Truth and a dazzling “reality”, he seeks the “truth of being” in *logoi*, contenting himself with “the stand-in mediacy of logos” (Blumenberg 35). This “mediacy” has disappeared from Kien’s windowless library, monument to a self-sufficient, autonomous Word. Kien, the philologist, is truly dazzled by this very literal *Logos*. Appalled by the fate of books in the *Theresianum*, the “public pawnbrowning establishment” (208) (“die staatliche Pfandleihanstalt”; 223) whose top floor is dedicated to books, Kien decides to take action:

Since the philologist in him still lived, he decided to devote himself, when peaceful times should again bless the land, to a fundamentally new textual examination of the gospels. It was possible that Christ had in fact not referred to men at all, and the barbarian hierarchy had falsified the original words of their founder. The unexpected appearance of Logos in the Gospel of St. John gave abundant grounds for doubt, all the more since the usual explanations refer it back to a Greek influence. He felt himself equipped with enough knowledge to guide Christianity back to its true sources. (239)
In the constant conflation of books and human beings in Kien’s dreams and fantasies, there is not so much a Christian hope in the incarnation of the dead letter as a true horror at the corruption of the fixed, stable word by a weak flesh – there is a repetitive nightmarish imagery of bleeding and suffering books in the novel. Kien’s Quixotic madness consists precisely in preferring books over men, and in attributing pre-eminence to the order of words over the order of things.

Grotesque caricature of intellectual hubris, Kien tries to smother the surrounding world by throwing over it a symbolic mantle. In the presence of the intruding divan bed, Kien wonders: “Der Diwan, der eigentliche, lebendige Diwan ist leer und trägt weder Muschel noch Lasten. Und wenn er nun künstlich Lasten träge? Wenn man ihn mit einer Schicht schöner Bücher belüde? Wenn er ganz verdeckt wäre von Büchern, daß man ihn fast nicht sieht? ” (57) (“The divan bed, the real divan bed was empty and had neither mussels nor burdens upon it. But suppose it were made to carry a burden? Suppose it were covered with a layer of beautiful books? Suppose it were covered all over with books, so it could not be seen at all?”; 58).

Unsuccessful, in a demonstration of his almost animistic belief in the “omnipotence of words”, he will then attempt to talk the intruding furniture into moving out of his library: “Vielleicht hätte das Bett schließlich nachgegeben. Doch Kien verlegte allen Nachdruck, dessen er fähig war, in seine Worte. Für die Arme blieb nichts, aber auch gar nichts übrig. Das Bett verharrte, unberührt und stumm. Kien geriet in Wut” (90-91) (“In the end the bed might have given in. But Kien put into his words all the force of which he was capable. None was left over for his arms, none whatever. The bed stayed where it was, unmoved and mute. Kien broke into anger”; 87).

Soon, words will be used to erect a barricade similar to the too porous walls of the library, a bastion against a traumatic reality. The use of words to weave an invariably ineffectual symbolic armour is also found in his constant painful self-serving and self-deluding rationalizations. Thus, Berkeley’s famous empiricist motto is turned into the logically spurious and fallacious syllogism:
“Esse percipi, sein ist Wahrgenommenwerden, was ich nicht wahrnehme, existiert nicht” (72) (“Esse percipi. To be is to be perceived. What I do not perceive, does not exist”; 71). Reason, for this enlightened champion of a disinterested Logos, is regularly conflated with his reasons.

“[L]eibhaftige Irrsinn” (186) (“[M]adness incarnate”; 172), Therese progressively comes to embody the resistance of reality to his categories. Confronted to her, Kien tries constantly, almost compulsively, to pin her down:

He felt at his best when he could relegate her to the one category where there was room for everything which he was unable, for his education and understanding, to explain. Of lunatics he had a crude and simple idea; he defined them as those who do the most contradictory things yet have the same word for all. According to this definition Therese was – in contra-distinction to himself – decidedly mad. (111)

Therese, as true Lacanian Real, appears not so much as the resistance of a pre-existent reality to Kien’s esprit de système as the residue, inassimilable leftover of his categorizing efforts.

Behind the familiar – and loathed sight – of her starchy blue skirt, there is something inscrutable, which instils in Kien a “pervasive epistemological anxiety” (Donahue 63). Donahue has noticed the progressive “textualization” of Therese who “represents the challenge to fixable, stable meaning, even while she represents the fantasy text that elicits the very prowess boasted by the philologist” (63). We could see in Therese a victim of what Terence Cave, in
Recognitions, describes as “male epistemophilia”: “[I]n Othello and Cymbeline, the woman falls foul of male epistemophilia: faced with her incomprehensible difference, the man fills in the blank space with his obsessive interpretations as if they were self-evident, and thus eliminates her” (284). What a better example of this obsessive epistemophilia than the catalogue, the litany that constitutes Kien’s endless diatribe against women during his discussion with his brother Georg. Drawing from his limitless pedantic erudition, he strings a series of misogynistic readings of Classical and Biblical stories. This textualization of Therese seeks to “tame” her and to smooth away her difference. Yet, as we will see, Kien utterly fails in his attempts to decipher, inscribe and even write off Therese.

As well as turning a blind eye to the world, Kien also turns a deaf ear to it. Not surprisingly, he is no less obsessed by silence as by blindness; for his work, “für die erste und oberste Bedingung Ruhe war. Er schnappte nach Schweigen wie andere nach Luft” (67) (“the first and most important condition was quiet. He panted for silence as others do for air”; 66). Very early in the novel, after his Sunday walk, we learn about the philologist’s disdain for the “babbling rabble”: “Wochentags schwitzte oder schwatzte man für sein Brot. Sonntags schwatzte man umsonst. Mit dem Ruhetag war ursprünglich ein Schweigetag gemeint. Was aus dieser wie aus allen Institutionen geworden war, ihr genaues Gegenteil, sah Kein mit Spott. Er hatte für einen Ruhetag keine Verwendung. Denn er schwieg und arbeitete immer” (34) (“On weekdays: sweat and babble to earn a living. On Sundays: seat and babble for nothing. The day of rest had been first intended as a day of silence. Kien noted with scorn that this institution, like all others, had degenerated into its exact opposite. He himself had no use for a day of rest. Always, he worked and always in silence”; 36). It is also the illiterate Therese who comes to embody this mindless chatter of the world – idle talk has in fact traditionally been associated with a superficial, feminine curiositas – which little by little perturbs the silence of the library. She
repeats constantly the same “litany” of common-places to force Kien to write down a will in her favour. Kien, who has until then used blindness to ward off Therese’s presence, dreams of growing “ear-lids”:

Eines Nachts wuchsen ihm plötzlich Lider an die Ohren, er öffnete und schloß sie nach Belieben, wie bei den Augen. Er probierte sie hundertmal aus und lachte. Sie klappten, sie hielten schalldicht, wie gerufen wuchsen sie und gleich vollendet. ... Da wachte er auf, aus den Ohrlidern waren gewöhnliche Lappen geworden und er hatte geträumt. Wie ungerecht, dachte er, der Mund kann ich schließen, wann ich will, so fest ich will, und was hat ein Mund zu besagen? Für die Nahrung ist er da, und doch so gut geschützt, aber die Ohren, die Ohren sind jedem Ergusse ausgeliefert!

One night he grew lids to his ears, he opened and closed them as he pleased, just as with his eyes. He tried them out a hundred times and laughed. They fitted exactly, they were soundproof, they grew as if they had been ordered and were complete at once. ... Then he woke up, his earlids had become ordinary bedclothes and he had dreamed. How unfair, he thought; I can close my mouth whenever I like, as tight as I like, and what has a mouth to say? It is there for taking in nourishment, yet it is well defended, but ears – ears are a prey to every onslaught. (109-110)

Just as blindness was supposed to prevent the doors and the pieces of furniture from “quartering” the “living body” of Kien’s library, his phantasmic ear-lids will protect him against Therese’s “litany”, against the threat of an encroaching, meaningless language undermining and contaminating the transparent, meaningful order literally “embodied” in the library.

Kien strives for a silent mental space, his Kopfbibliothek, where the associations of his prodigious “almost terrifying memory” (20) would take place unhindered: “Er trage gleichsam eine zweite Bibliothek in Kopf, ebenso reichhaltig und verläßlich wie die wirkliche” (18) (“He did indeed carry in his head a library well provided and as reliable as his actual library; 20).
Once the lights are off and silence reigns, Knowledge, like in a theatre, can speak through Kien, he himself reduced to the mere performing stage for the proliferation of a de-subjectivized, “acephalous” knowledge: “Die Wissenschaft blühte. Abhandlungen schossen wie pilze aus dem Schreibtisch” (71) (“Learning flourished. Theses sprouted from the writing desk like mushrooms; 71). Interestingly, his scholarly work which gives meaning to his whole existence as the “ersten Sinologen seiner Zeit” (16) (“greatest living authority on sinology”; 18) and which appears to Kien as the finest expression of his will and his almost omniscient consciousness, is at the same time described as the sphere of “habit”, “routine”, “compulsion”, where his otherwise overbearing ego withdraws into the background. Not surprisingly, Kien himself is aware that Therese’s monotonous litanies strangely echo his own scholarly ones— at one point when he temporally succeeds at blocking out any outside interference, “[ä]ltere Litaneien meldeten sich in ihm zu Wort; darüber vergaß er die ihre” (138) (“[w]ord by word, older litanies came back to him and he forgot hers”; 131).

In fact, each one of the novel’s rival private universes works in a similar way. They could be described with the same metaphor that the narrator uses to describe the different tables of the seedy cellar, Ideenhimmel: “jedes Marmortischchen führte ein gesondertes Planetendasein” (189) (“each little marble table had its own planetary existence”; 174). In what amounts to a grotesque privatization of language, words are invested with different meaning by the gallery of narcissistic, mono-maniac types that populate the novel. Each one of these Privatmythus – “learning” for Kien, “money” for Therese or “chess” for Fischerle – colors and invests signifiers with a particular and ultimately incommunicable meaning. Each character speaks a different language that constitutes, according to Canetti’s own term, his “akustische Maske”, described by Canetti as follows: “Bestimme Worte und Wendungen kehren immer wieder. Überhaupt besteht seine Sprache aus nur fünfhundert Worten. Er [der Sprecher] behilft sich recht gewandt damit. Es
sind seine fünfhundert Worte. Ein anderer, auch wortarm, spricht in anderen fünfhundert” (qtd in Kirsch 67) (“Certain words and expressions are recurrent. In general, one’s speech consists of no more than five hundred words. He [the speaker] can use them confidently. They are his five hundred words. Another speaks in another five hundred words”) (my translation). This “akustische Maske” constitutes the character’s “sprachliche Gestalt” (Canetti, Beruf, 48). In a way, it represents the only “materiality” and “corporeality” of a character reduced to a self-standing mask, a facade which hides nothing. It is the fundamentally alienating nature of this “akustische Maske” that Kien flees in the – no less alienating – “silent” discursive expanse of his Kopfbibliothek, where Knowledge “speaks”. Against the immateriality and fundamental lack of the “akustische Maske”, the real Privatbibliothek appears as providing a central solid kernel of order and meaning. In contrast, the alienating nature of Kien’s voice, his own “akustische Mask” in the novel, is all the more exposed. Voice is really here figured as a true excess. Kien’s tiny, anorexic, mouth is compared to the “ein Automatenschlitz” (188) (“slot of a machine”; 173), almost shut to keep his homeostasis and prevent both words from coming out and food from coming in.

Kien despises the mob of madmen and illiterate who “hatte sinnlos gelebt und waren sinnlos gestorben” (337) (“had lived without meaning and died without meaning; 307) yet who believe in happiness, “dieses verächtliche Lebensziel der Analphabeten” (230) (“that contemptible life-goal of illiterates”; 211). However, the “meaning” he and the library stand for is constantly taken for granted, asserted by the very massiveness of the library itself and constantly re-asserted in his emphatic and hollow reiteration of the “big” words – “sacred Cause of Learning”, “intellect”, etc. – pointing to the fact that, ultimately, the “meaning” of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake remains essentially tautological. Theoretical knowledge does not
seek anymore happiness in the contemplation of an ordered cosmos; rather, the artificial, rarefied order of the colossal library is the product of a blind epistemological drive.

Yet, even the hushed mental space of Kien’s Kopfbibliothek is haunted by a voice, not the Voice the ascetic monk seeks a divine Truth in the darkness of his silent monastic cell, but an inner self-disciplining voice constantly reminding him of his “duty to learning”, the constant superego injunction to work and pursue knowledge. An injunction which has replaced the search for truth and that Lacan likens to a “commandement” (L’envers 120), and even to “l’impératif catégorique” (121): “Il est impossible de ne pas obéir au commandement qui est là, à la place de ce qui est la vérité de la science – Continue. Marche. Continue à toujours plus savoir” (120) (“It is impossible not to obey the commandment that has taken the place of science’s truth – Keep going. March. Keep on knowing more.”) (my translation). This “disembodied, motiveless command of the modern master” (Nobus and Quinn 123) is what Dany Nobus and Malcom Quinn, in Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid, define as the Lacanian “epistemological drive”. This “traumatic, senseless injunction” (Žižek, Sublime 43) is not only related to but mirrored in Kien’s experience of Therese as a no less traumatic threat to all meaning, as “a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness” (Žižek, Sublime 43) sticking to Kien and the immutable order of his library. It is important to insist on the fact that, for Žižek, “this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on the Law its unconditional authority” (43). In other words, it is not only that the collapse of the library, the final holocaust, is brought about by the return of a repressed, traumatic Real that the walls of the library pretended to keep at bay; but, at the same time, the threatening Real is the very condition of existence of the library and of the walls on which it rests: the erection of the walls marks the concomitant creation of both a meaningful Order and of meaningless Chaos.
external to it. The library, monument erected to meaning and truth, is paradoxically the product of an industrious, ultimately motiveless, “epistemological drive”. It is not a coincidence that once the threat to the library disappears, what seemed an insidious external encroaching on Kien’s well ordered life, Kien and his library implode and disappear in flames.

5 Obscene curiosity

After the initial radical and caricatural antagonism between Wissbegier and Neugier set up from the beginning of the novel, these two curiosities will eventually appear as the two sides of the same coin. At the outset, Therese and Benedikt Pfaff, caretaker in Kien’s building, on the one hand, and Peter Kien, on the other hand, incarnate our two antithetical curiosities: respectively, a base curiosity for the inessential and a lofty intellectual curiosity. The caretaker, a retired policeman who spies the comings and goings at No. 24 Ehrlich Strasse, is a caricatural example of a low prying curiosity. Two feet under the “ovale Guckloch in normaler Höhe, unter dem Portier stand ... hatte er die Mauer seines Kabinetts mit einem zweiten Guckloch durchbohrt” (88) (“the oval peep-hole at the usual height, under which was written PORTER ... he had bored in the wall of his little box a second peep-hole. Here, where no one suspected him, he kept watch, kneeling”; 85). Kien pays the caretaker a monthly gratuity so he is not disturbed by any beggars or hawkers. Ironical premonition of his eventual demise, he imagines the caretaker as “steckte den ganzen Tag in seinem dunklen Loch, ohne ein Buch, muttersseelenallein” (120) (“crouching all day in its dark hole, without even a book, utterly alone”; 144). Therese’s feminine Neugier is also mentioned at the beginning of the novel: Therese eavesdrops on Kien, spies him through a crack, consumed by a curiosity which seeks to pierce Kien’s secret “crime”: “Sie vermutete ein Laster”, “eine Frauenleiche im Koffer”, “unsittliche Geheimnis” (28) (“She suspected a great vice”, a “woman’s body in a trunk”, an “immoral
the greedy servant looks behind each book searching for “the immoral secret” (29) which Kien would be hiding behind his appearance of a disinterested man of learning.

Against the representatives of this low, base curiosity (feminine, animalistic), Kien, locked up in his attic, embodies a disembodied desire to know. In the first chapter, we learn that Kien, whose reclusive and mysterious life allegedly arouses the curiosity of his colleagues, is himself immune to a distracting and base Neugier. As we have seen, from the very beginning, Kien’s Wissbegier is associated with blindness, and takes the form of a blind epistemological drive. To a certain extent, the library’s skylights function as a metaphor of Kien’s desire to know, figured here in no less paradoxical visual terms that Augustine’s inward contemplation. For, in spite of having its windows walled up, Kien’s library has skylights; Kien prefers this “oberlicht” (21) (“roof-lighting”; 23): “Auch schien ihm ein Licht, das alle Regale von oben gleichmäßsig erhellte, gerechter und seinem Verhältnis zu den Büchern angemessener” (21) (“illumination from above, which lit up all the shelves equally, seemed to him more just and more suited to his relations with his books”; 23). This “illumination” is both literal and metaphorical – “Die Obenfenster ließen Luft und Gedanken auf” (67) (“Through the lofty skylights poured illumination and inspiration”; 67). But, thanks to these skylights, Kien is also a true contemplator coeli who looks up at “the heavens”, ruled by immutable laws and whose contemplation instils in Kien a hubristic feeling of divine immutability and omniscience: “Auf der Fahrt durch das Unbekannte war man wie auf keiner Fahrt. Er genügte, sich durch die Beobachtungsfenster von dem Weiterbestehen einiger Naturgesetze zu überzeugen: dem Wechsel von Tag und Nacht, dem launenhaften, unaufhörlichen Treiben des Klimas, dem Flusse der Zeit, und man fuhr von selbst” (68) (“His journey through the unknown was like no journey. Enough for him to watch from the windows of his observation car the continued validity of certain natural laws; the change from night to day, the capricious incessant working of the
climate, the flow of time – and the journey was as nothing”; 67). But, of course, the harmony and stability of Kien’s “hermitage” is artificial, conquered at the price of thick walls and walled-up windows, which separate the library from the sublunar, shifting, busy city. More importantly, the skylight represents for Kien the ultimate phantasm of his intellectual voyeurism: a God-like panoptic view beyond any gaze.

In any case, Peter Kien’s journey in the novel involves a true descent into the darkness of the cave leading to a nightmarish amalgamation of Wissbegier and Neugier. First, in his dreams, his isolated, lofty, and airy observatory is threatened from below by a cthonic, sublunar world, inhabited by the masses, unstable like fire: “zur Zeit, da er aufzustehen pflegte, träumte er von einem gigantischen Bibliotheksgebäude, das statt des Observatoriums an einem Krater des Vesuvs erbaut war” (154) (“he was dreaming of a gigantic library built, on the site of the Observatory, at the crater of Vesuvius”; 144). In the last part of the novel, exiled from his library, Kien winds up eventually in the caretaker’s basement. Abused and extorted by him and Therese, he takes over his new office in the basement’s closet. Crouched on his knees, looking at the trousers and skirts of the passersby, Kien imagines he is reading a book: “Seine Hände blätterten unwillkürlich um, als hielten sie ein Bilderbuch fest und teilten den Augen ihre arbeit vor. Je nach der Geschwindigkeit der Hosen blätterten sie langsamer oder rascher” (420) (“His hands involuntary turned pages as if he were holding a picture book in them and sharing out the work for his eyes. The pages turned more slowly or more fast according to the speed with which the trousers went by”; 380). A progressive identification of the sordid basement with his lost library takes place and culminates in a dream:

Gegen Morgen verpflanzt er das Guckloch, sein Auge der Gleichförmigkeit, seine Beruhigung, seine Freude, in die Traumbibliothek, die er besitzt. Er bringt gleich an jeder Wand mehrere Öffnungen an. So muß er nicht lange suchen. Überall, wo Bücher fehlen,
hat er sich kleine Klappen erbaut, Symtem Benedikt Pfaff. … Unzählige Öffnungen laden zum Verweilen ein. (423)

Towards morning he transfers the peephole, his eye of monotony, his requiem, his joy, into his dream library. He places several peepholes in each wall. Thus he would never have to look long for one. Wherever books are missing he builds little peep-holes, the Benedikt Pfaff system. … Numberless peep-holes invite him to linger. (384)

In the caretaker’s sordid basement, Kien imagines he is in a new “study” at his “writing desk”; he is regaining his “wissenschaftliche Konzentration” (426) (“scholarly concentration”; 386), necessary to conduct “wissenschaftliche Arbeit am Guckloch” (428) (“his researches at the peephole”; 387) which will hopefully result in a “Charakterologie nach Hosen” (“Characterology of Trousers”) and an “Anhang über die Schuhe” (428) (“Appendix on Shoes”; 387). This farcical identification of Wissbegier with Neugier could be read as a true satire of specialisation: the dark secret vice suspected by Therese is nothing else than his absolute and solitary dedication to a branch of knowledge which is effectively used by Kien to filter away any other vital concerns. For, as Kien himself momentously concludes, “Das Übersehen liegt einem Gelehrten im Blut. Wissenschaft ist die Kunst des Übersehens” (427) (“Ignoring is in the blood of a learned man. Learning is the art of ignoring”; 387). Drawing on the double meaning of this “oversight”, Kien remains actually a true, pathetic “Überseher”; the skylights in his windowless attic inspired him the fantasy of having a commanding, panoptic, God-like view; an “oversight” which allowed him to overlook what happened down below as well as the very blind spot where his point of view originates. The grotesque image of his lanky figure, crouched in the basement, supervising from below, exposes the obscenity of his intellectual voyeurism, his fantasy of being an unseen, invisible, disembodied “Überseher” with a commanding sight beyond any gaze. More than ever, the overseeing Wissbegier entails a fundamental blindness or ignorance, oversight that should be regarded less as a passive unawareness as an active ignoring.
This collapsing of Wissbegier into Neugier can also be found at the narratological level in the figure of an “epistemologically strong”, almost omniscient, narrator. David Darby, among other critics, remarks that, despite its innovative form, the novel remains essentially a “classical novel”. Most critics, like Dieter Liewerscheidt, regard this as “a contradiction in the narrative conception of the novel”. William Collins Donahue explains this contradiction by reading the novel as essentially parodistic: he points out: “the relationship of Die Blendung to popular realism is not accidental or insidiously atavistic, but quite conscious and parodistic” (19). Yet, Die Blendung’s “realism” does not need to be regarded necessarily as a parodistic element or as an atavistic remnant of the voice of Science, of the omniscient narrator of the classical 19th century realist novel. David Darby has carefully followed the narrator’s voice as it “slip[s] between focalizations” (27) to conclude that there is an extradiegetic narrator, however discrete his presence might be, who possesses what Dolezel dubs the “authentication authority”. For Donahue, however, the narrator plays a minor role; instead: “The panoptic view we gain on the characters’ doomed solipsistic escapades proceeds less from a particularly knowledgeable or authoritative narrator, than from the characters’ own problematic retreat from the intersubjective, social realm” (37). In any case, the omniscient narrator is the object of a relentless encroaching: his voice, Barthesian voice of Science, is constantly “parasited” by the voice of the characters in the novel; his panoptic gaze, Godlike view from nowhere, is increasingly identified to the partial gaze of the characters. Peter Brooks remarks about the narrators of the later nineteenth-century realist novel:

Narrators are in fact more nearly voyeurs than watchmen; their post of observation is at the keyhole rather than in the tower, and what they see is partially obscured. Stories will

40 This is the title itself of his article: “Ein Widerspruch in der Erzählkonzeption von Elias Canettis Die Blendung.”
very often, both in narrative structure and theme, concern curiosity directed at the concealed, clothed, hidden body, with the concomitant suggestion that the source and meaning of the story is somehow hidden on or in that body. (Body 105-6)

The omniscient narrator in *Die Blendung* tends to become one of these voyeurs, but, in this case, the concealed body is none other than that of the voyeur himself, whose constant efforts to mask its presence can only serve to foreground it in all its obscenity. However, if Kien is the cautionary example of a panoptic view from nowhere amounting to nothing more than a form of blindness and “oversight”, the opposite is also true: the tunnel-vision of each character is posited as a comprehensive, panoptic view. Despite their reduced vision and partial voice, all the characters in the novel want to impose their own vision and voice as the universal one. Roland Barthes considered the literary text as being “atopic”, as “liquidating” any “meta-language”: “aucune voix (Science, Cause, Institution) n’est en arrière de ce qu’il dit” (Plaisir, 51) (“no voice (science, Cause, Institution) is behind what it is saying”; 30). Instead, it seems that, while the place of the omniscient narrator is impossible to occupy, it nonetheless remains inescapable, it is the place to which all the different voices that populate the novel aspire; so instead of denying its existence, it is important to see it as the site of an ongoing struggle to impose a certain “normative reality” (Donahue 36). As we said before, it is the uncomfortable place the narrative is told from and, more importantly, it is the place that the author cannot but occupy and the place we are called to occupy as readers. And it is the antagonism between *Wissbegier* and *Neugier* that makes this site appear in all its obscenity and inescapability.

6 Curious bodies: Knowledge between desire and drive

Dany Nobus and Malcom Quinn argue that the voice of the disembodied “master’s command” bears witness to the way “[m]astery survived, developed and dissimulated itself
through the progressive and violent transformation of tacit and embodied knowledge into abstract social agency” (123). In this context, psychoanalysis “occupies the sites of this process in the damaged bodies and psyches of modernity’s subjects, identifying mastery’s loci of control, its causes and its divisive effects” (123). It is precisely these “damaged bodies” which Die Blendung foregrounds. In Canetti’s novel is played out the inherent contradiction of the modern knowledge-functionary embarked in the endless pursuit of knowledge for its own sake but who still clings desperately to truth’s illusive promise of agency and freedom. The novel belies Kien’s initial boutade that knowledge and truth are the same thing. A “blind” compulsive epistemic drive at the heart of the pursuit of knowledge is at odds with a desire for Truth increasingly turned into a voracious greed for books. The gap between knowledge and truth is the same that separates drive and desire to know. It is time to trace both desire and drive back to the split, torn up “bodies” which are both their support and their product (as “bodies” of knowledge).

On the tramway just after getting married, Kien is first confronted with his responsibilities as a new husband. To the mother of a couple of children who were going to take the seat next to her, Therese bluntly says: “Kinder kommen zuletzt” (50) (“Children last”; 51). Kien is concerned about what Therese might have meant. Kien first hopes that she might be feeling like him and actually expressing the very reason why he got married: “Ich habe wegen die Bücher geheiratet, Kinder kommen zuletzt” (52) (“I married because of books; children last”; 53). Yet, Kien is anxious because Therese’s puzzling observation raises a “subject” on which he knows very little: “Sprechen ist schwer. Bücher darüber hab’ ich nicht” (52) (“It is difficult to speak of it. I have no books on it”; 53). Therese who had until them been inscribed in Kien’s supremely ordered cosmos as the longed-for maternal “Pflegerin” (47) (“foster-mother”; 48) for his library becomes an uncanny presence, a locus of “semantic instability” (Donahue), an interrogation mark addressed at him: “Kinder kommen zuletzt. Wenn man wüsste, was sie
wirklich gemeint hat. Sphinx‖ (52) (“Children last. If I only knew what she meant. Sphinx”; 53). This identification of the woman to a sphinx echoes the famous question “Was will das Weib?”, which, as Freud wrote in a letter to Marie Bonaparte, had been at the centre of all his intellectual efforts. In Die Blendung, this question takes the most disquieting turn of the Lacanian “Che vuoi?”: Kien is suddenly exposed to the enigma of Therese’s desire; he, who fancies himself as almost the supreme subject of “absolute knowledge”, is suddenly caught in the web of the other’s desire.

The enigma of Therese’s desire mirrors in fact the enigma of Kien’s own desire. In the subsequent incident where Therese is mocked because of her huge blue skirt, Kien pays attention for the first time to her skirt, and likens it to the mussel shell that once arrested his piercing desire to know. Suddenly, his thoughts are beset by a buried recollection from childhood that reads like a true Ur-Szene of curiosity:

lachte er mitten in seiner Wut, zog sich blitzrasch die Schuhe an, schleuderte die Muschel mit aller Kraft zu Boden und führte einen gordischen Freudentanz auf. Jetzt war ihre ganze Schale umsonst. Seine Schuhe zerdrückten sie. Bald lag sie splitternackt vor ihm da, ein Häuflein Elend, Schleim und Schwindel und überhaupt kein Tier. (53-4)

But Kien was surreptitiously contemplating the skirt. It was even bluer than usual and had been more stiffly starched. Her skirt was a part of her, as the mussel shell is part of a mussel. Let no one try to force open the closed shell of a mussel. A gigantic mussel as huge as this dress. They have to be trodden on, to be trampled into slime and splinters, as he had once done when he was a child at the seaside. The mussel yielded not a chink. He had never seen one naked. What kind of an animal did the shell enclose with such impenetrable strength? He wanted to know, at once: he had the hard, stiff-necked thing between his hands, he tortured it with fingers and finger-nails; the mussel tortured him back. He vowed not to stir a step from the place until he had broken it open. The mussel took a different vow. She would not allow herself to be seen. Why should she be so modest [?] He argued with her for several hours. But his words were as impotent as his fingers. He hated roundabout methods, he liked to reach his goal the direct way. Towards evening a great ship passed by, far out at sea. His eyes devoured the huge black letters on its side and read the name *Alexander*. Then he laughed in the midst of his rage, pulled on his shoes in a twinkling, hurled the mussel with all his strength to the ground and performed a Gordian dance of victory. Now her shell was utterly useless to her. His shoes crushed it to pieces. Soon he had the creature stark naked on the ground, a miserable fleck of fraudulent slime, not an animal at all. Therese without her shell – without her dress – did not exist. (54)

The violence and aggressiveness underlying the phallic gaze, “hard and appropriative, denuding and violative” (Brooks 98) is openly exposed in this Ur-szene. Freud himself saw a connection between the desire to know and sadism, the former would actually be “im Grunde ein sublimierter, ins Intellektuelle gehobener Sprößling des Bemächtigungstriebes” (“Disposition”, 450) (“a sublimated offshoot of the instinct of mastery exalted into something intellectual”; 324). In the end, despite all the efforts to force and pierce its secret, the mussel is no oyster, and Kien’s
desire to know yields no “pearl”. No naked Diana, no frozen flash of Truth, but a “fraudulent slime”, shapeless, Protean, “not an animal at all”, true Freudian “Thing” which represents the ultimate nightmare for Kien’s categorizing *esprit de système*. We have already referred to this “slime” as that impossible, secret *jouissance*, which is forbidden and completely repressed in the adult Kien, for whom the skirt represents the impenetrable limit. In the sentence that comes right after the paragraph we have just quoted, Kien concludes: “Therese ohne Schale – ohne Rock existierte nicht” (54) (“Therese without her shell – without her dress – did not exist”; 54). Kien develops henceforth a fetishist fixation on the skirt. As Freud observes: “wird etwa der letzte Eindruck vor dem unheimlichen, traumatischen, als Fetisch festgehalten. … die so häufig zum Fetisch erkorenen Wäschestücke halten den Moment der Entkleidung fest, den letzten, in dem man das Weib noch für phallisch halten durfte. (Freud, “Fetischismus” 385) (“the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish; … pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic”; 155). *Die Blendung* is therefore not one of Barthes’s traditional suspense narrative he likens to a striptease:

… un devoilement progressif: toute l’excitation se réfugie dans l’*espoir* de voir le sexe (rêve de collegian) ou connaître la fin de l’histoire (satisfaction Romanesque). Paradoxalement (pusqu’il est de consummation massive), c’est un plaisir bien plus intellectual que l’autre: plaisir oedipéen (dénuder, savoir, connaître l’origine et la fin)”  
(*Plaisir* 20)

... a gradual unveiling: the hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction). Paradoxically (since it is mass-consumed), this is a far more intellectual pleasure than the other: an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end). (10)
But *Die Blendung* is neither a text of “jouissance” offering a vanishing glimpse of truth, “la mise en scène d’une apparition-disparition” (19) (“the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance”; 10), based on Barthes remark that “[l]’endroit le plus érotique du corps n’est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille?” (*Plaisir* 19) ([i]s not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes?*); 9). Therese’s fortress-like, starched skirt does not offer any such gap. Following Barthes, Peter Brooks describes a narrative which delays the final unveiling of truth in a meandering along fetishised “part objects” to the point that “the moment of complete nakedness, if it ever is reached, most often is represented by silence, ellipsis.” These narratives are “interested not only in points of arrival, but also in the dilatory moments along the way” (19) because they seem to know that the fulfillment of desire is also the end of it: “the death of desiring, the silence of text” (20). If Flaubert is a master of this type of narrative, as we saw with *Bouvard*, *Die Blendung* brings it to its paroxystic limit: the object of desire is here an object of horror and hatred, a true Medusa-head to which Kien is exposed at the beginning of the novel on his wedding night; yet, fleeing from it is impossible and takes the form of a compulsive gravitating around it, unequivocal signal that Therese points to Kien’s own hard core, to his very raison d’être. *Die Blendung* is a continuation of sorts of *Bouvard* where the existence in the Foucauldian “grey expanse of the library” is not a decentred drifting in the symbolic sea, ultimate phantasmatic scenario of a return to the enveloping maternal element, but a senseless, compulsive gravitation around an empty centre: Therese functions in the novel as the return of Kien’s repressed, denied corpo-reality.

The mussel’s “slime” is uncannily reminiscent of Lacan’s description of the “lamella”: “Cette lamelle, cet organe, qui a pour caractéristique de ne pas exister, mais qui n’en est pas moins un organe … c’est la libido. C’est la libido, en tant que pur instinct de vie, c’est-à-dire de vie immortelle, de vie irrépressible, de vie qui n’a besoin, elle, d’aucun organe, de vie simplifiée
et indestructible” (221) (“This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ ... is the libido. It is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life”;
197-8). At work in Kien’s impotence, in his refusal to pierce the mystery of Therese, there is a supremely sublimated libido sciendi which does not want to look at its origins, pure, undifferentiated libido.

In the last part of the novel, Georg Kien will also try to make his brother Peter acknowledge his own sublimated sexual desire by conjuring up a fictional parable about termites:

Is it possible to live at closer quarters than the termites do? What a terrifying accumulation of sexual stimuli would not such a stock produce – if the creatures were divided as to sex? They are not so divided, and the instincts inherent in that division are much more reduced among them. Even what little they have, they fear. When they swarm, at which period thousands, nay millions, are destroyed apparently without reason, I see in this the release of the amassed sexuality of the stock. They sacrifice a part of their number, in order to preserve the rest from the aberrations of love. The whole stock would run aground on this question of love, were it once to be permitted. I can imagine nothing more poignant that an orgy in a colony of termites. The creatures forget – a colossal recollection has seized hold of them – what they really are, the blind cells of a fanatic whole. Each will be himself, it begins with a hundred or a thousand of them, the madness spreads, their madness, a mass madness, the soldiers abandon the gates, the whole mound burns with unsatisfied love, they cannot find their partners, they have no sex, the noise, the excitement far greater than anything usual, attracts a storm of real ants; through the guarded gates their enemies press in, what soldier thinks of defending himself, they want only love; and the colony who might have lived for all eternity – the eternity we all long – dies, dies of love, dies of that urge through which we, mankind, prolong our existence! It is a sudden transformation of the wisest into the most foolish. (432-3)

There is in this parable a not too veiled allusion to Freud’s theory of drives of which Canetti was particularly critical. According to Donahue, Georg uses this parable to flatter his brother by pretending to espouse Freud’s view of the inherently asocial nature of the sexual instincts which must be controlled – repressed or sublimated – for society, civilisation, to see the light (163). Then, in the second part of the parable, Georg’s words are uncannily premonitory:

Es ist – man kann das mit nichts vergleichen, ja, es ist, als ob du dich eines hellichten Tages, bei gesunden Augen und voller Vernunft, mitsamt deinen Büchern in Brand setzen würdest. Niemand bedroht dich, du hast Geld, soviel du brauchst und willst, deine Arbeiten werden von Tag zu Tag umfassender und eigenartiger, seltene alte Bücher fallen dir in die Hände, du erwirbst wunderbare Manuskripte, keine Frau betritt deine Schwelle,
du fühlst dich frei und behütet, durch deine Arbeit, von deinen Büchern – da legst du, ohne Anlaß, in diesem gesegneten und unerschöpflichen Zustand, Feuer an deine Bücher und läßt sie und dich ganz ruhig darin verbrennen. Das wäre ein Geschehen, das entfernt an jenes in Termitenstock heranreichte, ein Hervorbrechen des Sinnlosen, wie dort, nur nicht in so großartigen Maßen. Ob wir das Geschlecht einmal überwinden werden, wie die Termiten? Ich glaube an die Wissenschaft, täglich mehr, und täglich weniger an die Unersetzbarkeit der Liebe! (479-80)

It is – no, it can’t be compared with anything – yes, it is as if by broad daylight, with healthy eyes and in full possession of your understanding, you were to set fire to yourself and all your books. No one threatens you, you have as much money as you need and want, your work is growing every day more comprehensive and more individual, rare old books fall into your lap, you are acquiring superb manuscripts, not a woman crosses your threshold, you feel yourself free through your work and protected by your books – and then, without a provocation, in this blissful and creative condition, you set fire to your books and let them and yourself burn together without a protest. That would be an event which would have a remote relation to the one I have described among the termites, an outbreak of utter senselessness, as with them, but in so astounding a form. Shall we too one day, like the termites, dispense with sex? I believe in learning more firmly everyday, and everyday less firmly in the indispensability of love! (433)

Thus, according to Georg, the burning of the library is a return of the repressed sexual instincts, “ein Hervorbrechen des Sinnlosen” (“an outbreak of utter senselessness”), in a termite-scholar described as “beinah geschlechtlos” (“virtually sexless”). For Donahue, Georg’s superficial Freudianism here is just a pose, for a chapter earlier the very same character is presented as championing the “Massentrieb” (“mass drive”) “as itself a kind of libido, somehow both mankind’s first cause and destiny” (Donahue 166). From this point of view, Kien, caricatural misanthrope and misogynist, is certainly not a termite; the final fire of the library could then be interpreted not as the cataclysmic collapse of a stifling civilization ushered by the return of the repressed, paradoxically individualistic, sexual drive; but, instead, as the return of the repressed,
liberating, *Massentrieb*, which dissolves the thick walls that separated and insulated the library from the crowd. In both cases, the fire is seen as a form of implosion exposing self-destructive tendencies, a regression to a primitive stage, the asocial, narcissistic individual in the case of Freud, and the undifferentiated crowd in the case of Canetti.

Yet, there is another aspect of this parable that is particularly interesting. Donahue sees in the parable of the termites a problematization of Freud’s distinction between animal *Instinkt* and human *Trieb*: “the hard-wired *Instinkt* ... metamorphoses into the *Trieb* just at the point where the termites begin to act like the humans Georg has really in mind” (Donahue 164); as a proof, he mentions Canetti’s use of the term *Trieb* to refer to love exactly in the transition point where the parable is extended to human beings: “der Stock, der vielleicht Ewigkeiten gelebt hätte, die Ewigkeiten, nach denen wir uns sehnen, stirbt, stirbt an Liebe, an dem *Trieb*, durch den wir, eine Menschheit, unser Weiterleben fristen!” (“the colony who might have lived for all eternity – the eternity we all long – dies, dies of love, dies of that *urge* through which we, mankind, prolong our existence!”). This “Trieb” suggests also something else. If termites, which are “*blinde Zellen eines fanatischen Ganzen*” (“blind cells of a fanatic whole”), were to become aware of their individuality, their “madness” will be close to human (partial) drive, for, mutilated as they are – blind, castrated – practically reduced to a digestive system, eating beyond their individual needs in order to produce food for their community, they resemble the “partial object” of the Freudian (death-)drive, especially in its conceptual re-elaboration by Lacan’s “pulsion” (“drive”), the “unconditional impetus which disregards the proper needs of the living body and simply battens on it” (31). Kien’s epistemological drive can be identified to this death-drive, and the “partial object” would be Kien’s own “hypertrophied” head, self-sufficient and monstrous growth; after all, he would be happily reduced to his *Kopfbibliothek*. In a novel structured around the head – the three parts are named respectively, *Ein Kopf ohne Welt*, *Kopflose Welt*, *Welt in Kopf* – the
sovereign Subject of the Enlightenment is shown as a decapitated subject: one the one hand, the headless body is condemned to wither away, in the case of Kien, or is abandoned to exacerbated lowly desires in the case of Therese – incarnation of pure greed, true headless woman –; and, one the other hand, we have a self-sufficient severed head: “It is as if a part of the body, an organ, ... sublimated, torn out of its bodily context, elevated to the dignity of the Thing and thus caught in an infinitely repetitive cycle, endlessly circulating around the void of its structuring impossibility” (Žižek, Fantasy 31)

This perspective on Kien’s epistemological drive is particularly interesting to shed some light on the complex treatment of materiality and corporeality in the novel. As Žižek notes, the space of the death drive is a paradoxical space of “moving statues, of dead objects coming alive and /or of petrified living objects” (Fantasy 89): “For a human being to be ‘dead while alive’ is to be colonized by the ‘dead’ symbolic order; to be ‘alive while dead’ is to give body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization (‘lamella’)” (89). Truly colonized by the symbolic order, Kien is literally “mortified”, almost mummified – even petrified – progressively reduced to a dried-up skeleton from which all flesh has vanished. Meanwhile, the books become alive, they bleed, the experience pain, they burn like flesh; the library is compared to a (“mutilated”) “Organismus” (“living organism”); Kien even wonders if books might feel pain and muses:

Jedes denkende Wesen überkommen Augenblicke, in denen ihm die hergebrachte Grenze, welche die Wissenschaft zwischen Organischem und Anorganischen gezogen hat, künstlich und überholt erscheint, wie alle menschlichen Grenzen. Unser heimlicher Widerspruch gegen diese Scheidung verrät sich im Ausdruck “tote Materie”. Was tot ist, hat gelebt. Müssen wir schon von einem Stoff gestehen, daß er nicht lebe, so wünschen wir ihm doch an, daß er einmal gelebt habe. Am sonderbarsten dünkte es Kein, daß man von Büchern geringer dachte als von Tieren. Das Mächtigste, das unsere Ziele, also unser
Dasein bestimmt, soll weniger Anteil am Leben haben als unser ohnmächtiges Schlachtopfer, das Tier? (68)

[T]he traditional frontier set by science between the organic and the inorganic, seems artificial and outdated, like every frontier drawn by men. Is not a secret antagonism to this division revealed in the very phrase ‘dead matter’? For the dead must once have been the living. Let us admit then of a substance that it is dead, have we not in so doing endowed it with erstwhile life. Strangest of all did it appear to Kien that men thought less highly of books than of animals. To these, the mightiest of all, these which determine our goals and therefore our very being, is commonly attributed a smaller share of life than to mere animals, our impotent victims. (68)

Whereas books seem to be crossing the frontier towards the organic and the living, Kien is doing the opposite journey, looking more and more like a disincarnated skeleton. Yet, they will never meet in their respective journeys; there is no middle ground in the paradoxical space of drive: the possibility of “living”, “embodied” knowledge is foreclosed. Kien is caught in the gap between two alternative, mutually exclusive realities. Instead of the Christian opposition between the “living word” – reunion of body and soul – and the “dead letter”, we have, on the one hand, the epistemological drive which bestows ink and paper volumes with a life of their own in all its fleshy viscosity (books bleed and smell like burned flesh when they are on fire); and, on the other hand, the epistemological drive mortifies an increasingly disincarnated, fleshless Kien.

In other words, knowledge in Die Blendung cannot be “incorporated”. There is no better proof of this than the striking contrast between Kien’s anorexia and his bulimic spiritual appetite – in Die Blendung, knowledge is always figuratively ingested, the object of “hunger”. The novel begins with Kien’s chance encounter with a curious boy in one of his morning walks. Kien gives him the choice between a chocolate and a book; he feels sorry for the young boy who, despite seeming to have “frische, vielleicht schon lesehungrige Geist” (10) (“an eager spiritual appetite”);
is like all children, noisy, idle, one of those creatures for whom “Nicht den Bauch, aber den ganzen Körper hatten sie zu ihrem Gott erhoben” (11) (“their bellies, their whole bodies have become their gods”; 13). Kien, on the contrary, pays little attention to his lower bodily functions: “Das Bewußtsein bewahre man für wirkliche Gedanken; sie nähren sich von ihm, sie brauchen es; ohne Bewußtsein sind sie nicht denkbar. Kauen und Verdauen verstehst sich von selbst” (26) (“He reserved consciousness for real thoughts; they depend upon it; without consciousness, thoughts are unthinkable. Chewing and digesting happen of themselves”; 28). Kien’s indifference towards food will evolve into a true aversion for food and a refusal to eat. In chapter XIII, “Prügel” (“Beaten”), Kien is “ashamed” of his hunger, for “[i]n der Stufenfolge menschlicher Tätigkeiten stand am allertiefsten das Essen” (154) (“[i]n the hierarchy of human activities, eating was the lowest”; 144). Kien’s anorexia contrasts with Therese’s greed. In Kien’s fantasmic scenario about Therese’s death, Therese’s greed for money is compared to a form of self-cannibalistic greed: “aus Geldgier fraß sie sich auf” (285) (“[Therese] had devoured herself for the love of money”; 260). Kien imagines that Therese is locked up without food – the chapter’s title is “Verhungert” – and “Sie, von ihrer Gier nach einem Testament in den Wahnsinn getrieben, fraß sich selbst Stück für Stück auf. … In Fetzen riß sie das Fleisch von ihrem Leib herunter, diese Hyäne, sie lebte von ihrem Leib in den Mund … dann starb sie als Skelett” (286)” (“driven to madness by her desire for his will, had eaten herself up, piece by piece. ... She tore the flesh off her bones in tatters, this hyena, she lived from body to mouth, ... then she died, a skeleton” (261). This scenario and the chapter’s title strangely echo Kien’s own deterioration and decay into a “skeleton”, consumed as he is by an all devouring intellectual curiosity. At this point, it is important to introduce an interesting distinction. The “object” of Kien’s own “spiritual appetite” is an indication that we are in the presence not of a desire to know but of an epistemological drive. For, as Lacan notes:
Cet objet … n’est en fait que la présence d’un creux, d’un vide, occupable, nous dit Freud par n’importe quel objet, et dont nous connaissons l’instance que sous la forme de l’objet perdu a. L’objet petit a n’est pas l’origine de la pulsion orale. Il n’est pas introduit à titre de la primitive nourriture, il est introduit de ce fait qu’aucune nourriture ne satisfera jamais la pulsion orale, si ce n’est à contourner l’objet éternellement manquant. *(Quatre 202)*

[T]his object ... is in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied, Freud tells us, by any object, and whose agency we know only in the form of the lost object, the petit a. The objet petit a is not the origin of the oral drive. It is not introduced as the original food, it is introduced from the fact that no food will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by circumventing the eternally lacking object. (180)

The epistemological drive is at the heart of Kien’s mechanical existence at the “service of Truth”, where truth eventually does not matter as much as “work”. Kien is not so much obsessed with attaining an elusive – and desirable – truth as with recovering his productive work routine, so his scholarship can “flow” once more and theses “sprout ... like mushrooms”. The blissful state of contemplation of Antiquity has been replaced by a no less blissful – self-oblivious – “trance” at the service of the machine of knowledge. Truth is central to the functioning of this machine, to the endless gravitation of the epistemological drive around it; it is an empty space though, a void, and, as such, it is going precisely to be filled by Kien’s own phantasmic images, visions, fetishised “objects” for a desire of truth. Kien’s epistemological drive will then veer into a desire, a “greed for new books”.

The novel tells the story of Kien’s fall from grace, a true fall of knowledge. The homeostasis of the library, domain of the “radical ontological closure” (*Žižek, Fantasy* 30) of drive, is disturbed the moment Therese enters Kien’s life. Here, we might consider that it is Therese’s accidental intrusion that acts like the grain of sand in his, until then perfectly oiled,
intellectual machine; or, we might argue that human beings cannot function as a machine and that Therese only happens to be there at the right moment to be cast into the role of the Thing, occupying a void that can be located in fact inside of Kien himself; we have here the duplicity of Lacanian *objet petit a*, an object masking a void in the subject. Peter Kien is the ultimate embodiment of the belief in “knowledge for its own sake” brought to its paroxystic and caricatural form. Kien aspires to identify himself with the machine of Science, to be it, ideally to become its impossibly disembodied support. In light of this, it becomes clear that the incontrollable, unmasterable Therese just embodies this “internal” impossibility. It is with this in mind that we should read how Kien’s epistemological drive progressively veers into a true “greed for new books” once Kien enters an economy of desire that seeks the possession of the “object”. Instead of knowledge – the object of drive – now “truth” is the goal of this desire, and truth takes accordingly the reified form of books, which can be possessed and owned. As Dany Nobus and Malcom Quinn point out: “The commodity is a compensation for alienated knowledge and deferred desire” (119). The proliferation and commodification of knowledge are therefore no accident, but a logical offshoot of the epistemological drive and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Kien himself becomes aware of his “greed for new books” when he is expelled from his apartment-library; he attributes this greed to the pernicious influence of Therese:


Imprisoned for months with a lunatic, he had in the end been unable longer to resist the evil influence of her disease and had himself been infected. Grasping to excess, she had
imparted a portion of her greed to him. A devouring lust for other books had estranged him from his own. (172)

Kien thinks at this point that he is cured from that greedy madness. However, two chapters later, he is confronted with a grotesque mirror image of his library and of his own greed for knowledge: The pawnbroking establishment, Theresianum, which “liegt, ein wahres Fürstenherz, mit prächtigen, dicken Mauern, nach außen wohlverschlossen, stolz und vielstöckig da” (223) (“stands splendidly and thickly walled about like a true prince’s heart, well defended against without”; 205), and whose top floor is devoted to books brought here by “die Unmenschen, die ihre Bücher aus Geldgier herbringen” (224) (“the abandoned creatures who bring their books here [to the Theresianum] out of greed for filthy lucre”; 206). One should be ashamed for humanity who “für eine Menschheit, die, seit ihr das Drucken so leicht fällt, ganz und gar vergessen hat, welche Heiligkeit jedem gedruckten Buchstaben innewohnt (224) (“now that printing seems natural to them, have altogether forgotten the special sanctity contained in each single printed letter”; 206). Rather than standing against Kien’s own Privatbibliothek, true temple devoted to Learning, the Theresianum, true marketplace bearing witness to a commodified cultural economy of accumulation and consumption, stands rather as the concealed “dirty” secret of Kien’s library.

Kien’s deformed famulus, Fischerle, warns him about the hog on the top floor which “[f]rißt Bücher” (264) (“devours books”) and “ist von den Büchern so dick” (264) (“gets fat on books”; 242):

Was wollen Sie, sagt das Schwein, ich hab’ ihn selbst einmal gehört, was fang ich mit dem vielen Dreck an. Dreck hat er gesagt, für Bücher sagt er immer Dreck, zum Fressen ist ihm der Dreck gut genug. Was wollen Sie, sagt er, der Dreck bleibt hier monatelang liegen, lieber hab’ ich was davon und stopf mich satt damit. Er hat ein eigenes Kochbuch
zusammengestellt, mit vielen Rezepten drin, jetzt sucht er einen Verleger dafür. Es gibt zuviel Bücher auf der Welt, sagt er, und zu viel hungrige Magen. Meinen Bauch verdank’ ich meiner Küche, sagt er, ich will, daß jeder so einen Bauch hat, und ich will, daß die Bücher verschwinden, wenn es nach mir ging’, müßten alle Bücher verschwinden! Man könnt’ sie verbrennen, aber davon hat niemand was. Drum sag’ ich, man soll sie aufessen, roh, mit Öl und Essig, wie Salat, mit Semmelbrösel gebacken wie ein paniertes Schnitzel, mit Salz un Pfeffer, mit Zucker und Zimt, hundertunddrei Rezepte hat diese Sau, jeden Monat erfindet sie ein neues dazu, ich find’ das gemein, hab’ ich nicht recht? (264-5)

‘What do you expect, says the hog – I’ve heard him with my own ears – what am I to do with this muck? Muck, he said, he always calls books muck, muck’s good enough for him to eat. What d’you expect, he says, this muck lies about here for months. I’d as soon get something out of it, eat myself full once in a while. He’s written his own cookery book, full of different recipes, he’s looking for a publisher now. There are too many books in the world, he says, and too many empty stomachs. I owe my belly to my cookery, he says, I’d like everyone to have a belly like mine, and I want all books to vanish; if I had my way all books would have to go! You can burn them of course, but that does no one any good. So eat them up, say I, raw with oil and vinegar, or with sugar and cinnamon; a hundred and three receipts the hog’s got, finds a new one every month; it’s a sin and a shame, that’s what I say’. (242)

The hog consumes books blindly, indiscriminately, treating them as mere fodder, “muck”, to grow fatter. To a certain extent, the hog appears as the sordid materialization of Kien’s greedy, omnivorous epistemological drive; the hog’s “smelly” belly would then be a reflection of Kien’s fat yet immaterial Kopfbibliothek – it is Kien who early in the novel disregards novels because “[n]ur wird von Romanen kein Geist fett” (40) (“no mind ever grew fat on a diet of novels”; 42). However, the figure of hog is unbearable to Kien, not only because he recognises his own inverted mirror image in it – the hog functions truly as a return of his repressed bodily nature, in an exacerbated form; it is above all the fate of the books that is appalling for Kien – when he
finds out about the hog’s taste for the printed letter, he shrieks out loud, “Ka-ni-ba-len! Ka-ni-ba-len!” (265). Just like the disgusting slime he encountered when he was trying to pierce the secret of the mussel, the Theresianum and its hog are horrifyingly repellent to Kien because they threaten to break the spell of his fetishist adoration for books. Books constitute Kien’s sole objects of (an overwhelming) desire; and suddenly, it is suggested that books are neither “living beings” nor concealing phantasmic pearls of knowledge, and might instead be nothing else than mere vulgar objects passing from hand to hand. “Slime” and “muck” are that undifferentiated, shapeless, impossible materialization of *jouissance*, or rather as that *plus-de-jouir* – surplus enjoyment and lack of enjoyment – inassimilable remainder of Kien’s epistemological drive.

It is this leftover that first unsettled the homeostasis of the library. What appeared as an outside disturbance, an encroachment on the hermetic enclosure of Kien’s library and on the closed circle of Kien’s epistemological drive is revealed at the end to be just the projection of an internal impossibility. As Kien’s personal odyssey comes full circle, Kien finally regains his library. His brother has taken care of his affairs making sure that absolutely nothing will disturb the peace of the library. Yet, finally locked in his library, Kien is unable to go back to work; his usually perfectly controlled, logical chain of thought becomes a truly mad and accelerating stream of (un)consciousness which will literally set the library in flames. The threat to the library did therefore not come from the outside, Therese and the masses of “Analphabeten”, but from the *inside*: the self-possessed subject of the Enlightenment implodes succumbing to his self-destructive tendencies. What prevented Kien from identifying himself completely with the disembodied machine of knowledge was his own body, yet an unrecognisable body, painfully mortified, deformed, turned into the inassimilable leftover of his voracious appetite for knowledge. A voraciousness which Kien shares with the bloodhounds of his fantasitic scenario, the termites of Georg’s parable, the Theresianum’s hog, and, of course, with the flames that end
up eating up Kien and his library. All of them are consumed by a ravenous desire to absorb, to “assimilate” everything, and in that respect their appetite is comparable to Kien’s “spiritual appetite” that becomes self-annihilating, cannibalistic, for it is a desire to leave no leftover, to eat up everything, “incorporate” it in the ordered symbolic universe of the library. It is left to the fire, that great leveller, to consume all residues, Kien but also the books themselves.

7 Conclusion

The motif of the library on fire which closes the novel is traditionally read from the point of view of Canetti’s *Masse und Macht*, where fire appears as the main crowd symbol. Canetti writes: “Man kennt die magische Wirkung von Bränden auf Menschen aller Art. … Eine merkwürdige Verkehrung der alten Massenangst gebietet ihnen, an den Schauplatz des Brandes zu eilen, wenn er nur groß genug ist, und dort spüren sie etwas von der leuchtenden Wärme, die sie früher einte” (84-5) (“As it is well known, conflagrations of all kinds have a magical effect on men. ... If the conflagration is large enough, a curious reversal of their old mass fear commands them to hurry to its site, and they feel there something of the glowing warmth which formerly united them”; 77-8).

The readers of *Die Blendung* are left to wonder whether they should just celebrate this conflagration of the petrified, stagnant edifice of *Bildung*, even though they will resemble the crowd of idle *curieux* that any fire attracts. This might indeed seem justified for, after all, the novel is a satire of a very different kind of *curieux*, a scholar possessed by a compulsive desire to know. “Knowledge” is certainly at the centre of the novel, but in a strange and contradictory fashion, which becomes particularly evident if we compare the novel to a play as *Oedipus Rex.*

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41 In *Masse und Macht*, Canetti notes that fire “wants to swallow up everything, and is never sated” (76).
Terence Cave observes: "*Oedipus Rex* [is] the ideal example for a poetics concerned with questions of knowledge. Such a reading would bring out the extraordinary appropriateness of placing a character who *wants to know* at the centre of a plot resolved by recognition: anagnorisis would appear as the outcome of an exacerbated epistemophilia" (119). *Die Blsendung* is certainly a novel about knowledge and an immoderate desire to know. Yet, unlike Oedipus, who is granted access to the Truth at the expense of his two eyes, Peter Kien shuts his eyes to escape the traumatic Truth – at one point in the novel he even concedes that "Learning is the art of ignoring" (387).

Terence Cave remarks how Oedipus hubristic *epistemophilia* has sometimes been associated with the guilty curiosity of the reader herself: "[T]he spectator’s (or reader’s) 'curiosity' is projected, monstrously magnified, on the screen of fable itself; he is diagnosed as suffering from a milder form of Oedipus’ *epistemophilia*. Oedipus then becomes the ideal fable because it carries an awful warning for those addicted to fables" (120). There is here a shift from Oedipus’s dangerous curiosity for the blinding Truth to the more mundane Quixotic curiosity of the reader of novels caught in the pleasing figments of the imagination. This curiosity for novel reading is actually thematized in Canetti’s novel. Kien considers novel reading as speaking to a superficial, feminine, idle curiosity:

A novel was the only thing worth considering for her [Therese]. But no mind ever grew far on a diet of novels. The pleasure which they occasionally offer is far too heavily paid for: they undermine the finest characters. They teach us to think ourselves into other men’s places. Thus we acquire a taste for change. The personality becomes dissolved in pleasing figments of imagination. The reader learns to understand every point of view. Willingly he yields himself to the pursuit of other people’s goals and loses sight of his own. Novels are so many wedges which the novelist, the actor with his pen, inserts into the closed personality of the reader. The better he calculates the size of the wedge and the strength of the resistance, so much the more completely does he crack open the personality of his victim. Novels should be prohibited by the state. (42)

According to Kien, novels can only be the object of a lower Neugier, for they dissolve and undermine the Charakter, the unified ego – pre-condition on which rests any promise of knowledge and truth. The irony here of course is that, by inverting the terms, the pursuit of knowledge and truth is based on another set of “pleasing figments”, that of an imaginary, unified ego. Once an avid reader of novels, Peter Kien’s brother, Georg, regards novels as a wasteful expenditure of time and (sexual) energy: “Lesen als Streicheln, eine andere Form der Liebe, für Damen und Damenärzte, zu deren Beruf feines Verständnis für die intime Lektüre der Dame gehörte” (440) (“Reading was fondling, was another form of love, was for ladies and ladies’ doctors, to whose profession a delicate understanding of lecture intime properly belonged”; 398). The inevitable question is to ascertain where Die Blendung would fit in within this pessimistic poetic of the novel.

For one thing, Die Blendung is not a “texte de plaisir”. Many readers would concur with Marcel Reich-Ranicki’s observation that the novel is “ungenienessbar” (qtd in Donahue 40). Unpleasurable is the way the novel continuously sabotages recognition. This might sound paradoxical, but the central tenet of Cave’s Recognition is precisely that the recognition plot is intrinsically problematic; it remains always suspicious, too easy, to the point of veering into a
form of escapism into the facile comfort of an orderly, transparent world. *Die Blendung* clearly foregoes this pleasure. As Donahue remarks, *Die Blendung* denies the reader another typically novelistic pleasure, the pleasure of identification with the characters in the novel: “Canetti has deprived us of any identification possibilities by serving up misers, cheats, and self-deluded megalomaniacs” (32). If *Die Blendung* is not the archetypical novel Kien has in mind, it is neither the kind of book that he would read. His pronouncement that “no mind ever grew far on a diet of novels” implies that he only reads “substantial” books, which instead of having a dissipating effect contribute to cement his *Charakter* and expand his *Kopfbibliothek*: instead of consuming, Kien accumulates. The hog in the *Theresianum* works in fact as a perfect embodiment of the collusion of what appeared as the exacerbated antagonism between *Wissbegier* and *Neugier* in a cultural economy of accumulation and consumption; the hog reunites both curiosities: he grows fat on books, which he consumes as mere “muck”, thus indistinguishable from its own manure. *Die Blendung* refuses to give in to either curiosity and exposes them as the two complementary sides of Modernity. 

*Die Blendung* is an indigestible novel, resisting recuperation. It is important to remember that, within a, quintessentially novelistic, Quixotic tradition, *Die Blendung* is the story of a “bad” reader, in whom the reader of the novel is bound to see her own reflection. As a reader, Kien is strictly a “recuperator” who has absolute faith in language’s power to “exhaust” reality; the novel is precisely about the “reality” which accordingly emerges as the monstrous leftover of his way of reading. In S/Z, Barthes considers that the ultimate field of reference of the symbolic code “is occupied by a sole object, from which it derives its unity […] This object is the human body” (qtd in Brooks, *Body 6*). Yet, in Modernity, the body which incarnates this aspiration to organic unity looks increasingly like the fleshless, battered, skeleton-like body of Kien. Instead of a glimpse of Diana, embodied vision of Truth, *Wissbegier* sees Medusa, that is, its own damaged
bodily support. Similarly, the novel’s organicity appears rather as an opaque leftover speaking to literature’s role in Modernity as a sort of a cultural residue of an ongoing project of universal \textit{mathesis}. 
Chapter 4
The Aleph: The Impossible Object/Subject of Curiosity

“El Aleph” is probably one of Borges’s most ambitious and most commented short stories, perhaps because it is emblematic of Borges’s poetics of the short fiction. This poetics could be characterized with the Latin expression used in the story to describe the Aleph itself, *multum in parvo*: paradigmatic Borgesian short fiction, “El Aleph” is a true microcosm concealing a intricate web of erudite allusions and an impressive thematic constellation. Borges himself was amused and flattered by the numerous interpretations it had elicited. This amused attitude is very much in line with a writer whose serious metaphysical and epistemological preoccupations took the form of intellectual literary “games”. Borges’s unquenchable curiosity, just like Canetti’s and Flaubert’s, found a literary expression. Other Borgesian fictions might seem more illustrative of Borges’s epistemological concerns, like “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” or “La casa de Asterión” which Jaime Alazraki has studied as paradigmatic of Umberto Eco’s notion of “epistemological metaphor”. However, “El Aleph” is not only about knowledge and

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42 This is a brief synopsis of Borges’s short story, the last in the volume also entitled *El Aleph*, published for the first time in 1945: After the death of his unrequited love, Beatriz, Borges, protagonist and first person narrator, pays an annual visit to her house to honour and keep her memory alive. There, he meets her ostentatious and pompous cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, who is writing a pedantic and contrived encyclopaedic poem entitled “The Earth”. Worried by plans to tear down his house, Daneri makes a confidence to Borges: in the dining room’s cellar there is an “Aleph”; “el lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos” (623) (“the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist”; 127). To finish his poem, Daneri needs the Aleph. In a final visit to Daneri, Borges sees the Aleph, which he tries to describe in his own way. Filled with melancholy by the passing of time and the irreparable loss of Beatriz, Borges takes leave of Carlos and advises him to leave the city and its pernicious influence. In the epilogue, Borges manifests his doubts concerning the authenticity of the Aleph by quoting a lost manuscript by Richard Burton, in which other similar optical devices are mentioned.

43 In Elena del Río Parra and Julio Ortega’s words, “The Aleph” is “un taller al interior de la obra borgeana … una poética que revelaría en su extrema condensación, el proyecto literario del autor” (17) (“a workshop within Borges’s oeuvre … a poetics that reveals, in its extreme condensed form, the literary project of its author”) (my translation).

44 Already in 1970, pleasantly surprised by what the critics had read in his short story, Borges concedes, certainly with a dose of false naiveté: “Por supuesto, estoy sumamente agradecido por estos inesperados regalos” (“El Aleph” 84) (“I am deeply grateful for those unexpected presents”) (my translation).
literature’s epistemological ambitions; it is also a modern tale of curiosity. Supreme object of curiosity, the Aleph – “el lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos” (623) (“the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist”; 127). – gives form to the ultimate aspiration of theoretical curiosity, but represents at the same time its crystallization, its “embodiment” in an object, an artifact that elicits a very different kind of curiosity, idle, voyeuristic, almost obscene.

“El Aleph” is illustrative of Borges’s delicate balance between, on the one hand, ponderous metaphysical meditations and, on the other hand, the prosaic context, the lightness and brevity of the short form. The contrast does not necessarily deflate his epistemological ambitions but stands as a reminder that intellectual games are “serious games” which should not be taken too seriously, nor too lightly for that matter.

The Aleph works as an ambivalent metaphor for literature’s epistemological aspirations. The total vision afforded by the Aleph is exposed as a phantasmatic proliferation of the imaginary, and the Aleph as an artifact, an artifice that speaks to literature’s artificial production or recreation of the universe as much as to the “artificiality” itself of what we call the universe. However, true *speculum mundi*, the Aleph is nonetheless part of the universe as an almost obscene, abject “object” that has to remain concealed in a dark, underground cellar, Freudian lost object of primordial repression. “El Aleph” is mostly read as illustrating the powerlessness of language to “say” an ineffable universe; a universe which is at the same time shown as being a product, a re-creation of language; yet, it is not only that the lost object is paradoxically created by language after the fact (of its loss); more importantly, “El Aleph” is also a true Lacanian “traversing of the fantasy”, a renunciation of this primordial object. Paradoxically, a story that is regarded as being about the limits of language also taps into language’s fundamental ability to speak our human condition. Postmodern readings of Borges tend to emphasize his famous
boutade that metaphysics is a mere branch of fantastic literature. In a sleight of hand, literature’s marginal location within culture becomes the key of its englobing ambitions. Paradoxical formless sphere, the Aleph is not only a metaphor for a self-sufficient, unbounded literary infinite; the Aleph is also a very small, solitary, isolated sphere in the darkness of a basement, metaphor for one sphere among all the different spheres of human activity, including, of course, literature. Because of its marginal location, literature is simultaneously inside and outside culture; its only claim to “knowledge” might in fact be to lay bare what Pierre Bourdieu dubs the illusio⁴⁵, investment in the stakes of any of the different cultural “games”. Ultimately, “El Aleph” is a cautionary tale of curiosity infused with the ideal of wisdom that Bourdieu evokes in Méditations pascaliennes: “Les philosophies de la sagesse tendent à réduire toutes les espèces de d’illusio, même les plus pures, comme la libido scienti, à de simples illusions, dont il faut s’affranchir pour accéder à la liberté spirituelle à l’égard de tous les enjeux mondiaux que procure une mise en suspens de toutes les formes d’investissement” (122) (“Philosophies of wisdom tend to reduce all kinds of illusio, even the ‘purest’, like libido scienti, to simple illusions, which one has to abandon in order to attain the spiritual freedom with respect to all worldly prizes which come from the suspension of all forms of investment”; 101-102). In the short story’s elegiac and melancholic tone, we can also read Borges’s partial regrets in having invested his life in a “game” as fantastically alluring as literature.

“El Aleph” is a perfect example of Borges’s taste for references to medieval or ancient motifs; in the present case, a blend between the cabbalistic “Aleph” and the Ancient motif of a

⁴⁵“Participer de l’illusio, scientifique, littéraire, philosophique ou autre, c’est prendre au sérieux … des enjeux qui, nés de la logique du jeu lui-même, en fondent le sérieux, meme s’ils peuvent échapper ou paraître ‘désintéressés’ et ‘gratuits’ à ceux que l’on appelle parfois les ‘profanes’” (Bourdieu, Méditations 22-3) (“Taking part in the illusio – scientific, literary, philosophical or other – means taking seriously … stakes which, arising from the logic of the game itself, establish its ‘seriousness’, even if they may escape or appear ‘disinterested’ or ‘ gratuitous’ to those who are sometimes called ‘lay people’”; 11).
boundless sphere. By transposing these venerable motifs into a modern and often prosaic context, Borges not only achieves an ironic and even satirical effect, but also – as Emil Volek has remarked in “Borges Total, Paralelo y Plural” – throws a renewed, defamiliarizing light on typically modern (epistemological) questions (107). In this respect, I propose to read the Aleph as a concretization – both materialization and actualization – of the old motif of curiosity; indeed, the short story “El Aleph” reads as a cautionary tale about intellectual curiosity. At the confluence of what we have dubbed visual and textual curiosities, the Aleph is an “epistemological metaphor” that perfectly encapsulates the tensions and contradictions underlying literature’s epistemological ambitions in modernity. In fact, the historical roots of Borges’s metaphorical Aleph are double: On the one hand, there is the Hebraic tradition to which the very term used by Daneri, “Aleph”, refers. Aleph is the first letter in the Hebraic alphabet, a mute consonant pregnant with mystical signification in the cabbalistic tradition. Radically paradoxical, the ineffable, silent Aleph plays a central role not only in Biblical revelation, but also in the material Creation of the universe by God. In the Postscript of the story, the narrator Borges explains: “Para la Cábala, esa letra significa el En Soph, la ilimitada y pura divinidad; también se dijo que tiene la forma de un hombre que señala el cielo y la tierra, para indicar que el mundo inferior es el espejo y el mapa del superior” (627) (“In Kabbala, that letter signifies the En Soph, the pure and unlimited godhead; it has also been said that its shape is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher”; 132). In this explanation, there is already an imperceptible shift from an emphasis on the Word, or more precisely the Letter, to an emphasis on a visual element, here a mirror, which points to the other tradition in which the Aleph is rooted. For, on the other hand, the Aleph is first described in visual terms. The Aleph is the materialization of one of the “emblems” to which, according to the story itself, the mystics resort in their efforts to say the ineffable: “una
esfera cuyo centro está en todas partes y la circunferencia en ninguna‖ (625) (“a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere” (129) – an un-representable visual metaphor no less paradoxical than the silent Aleph. The metaphor of the sphere\(^{46}\) is obsessively recurrent in Borges’s stories and essays. Indeed, the volume *Otras disquisiciones*, published right after *El Aleph* in 1952, Borges devotes to it a short essay, “La esfera de Pascal” (“Pascal’s Sphere”). In this *inquisición*, Borges retraces some of the vicissitudes of the metaphor of the sphere, from “Jenófanes de Colofón”, who defended a God conceived of as an “eternal sphere” against anthropomorphizing representations of the divinities, to Pascal who uses the metaphor to refer not to God but to “la naturaleza” (“Nature”) and in whose manuscript the sphere was first qualified of “effroyable\(^{47}\)” (“frightful”), before he decided to erase the adjective. Borges concludes: “Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas” (638) (“Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors”; *Non-Fictions* 353). The short story, “El Aleph”, can therefore be considered as yet another chapter in the history of this epistemological metaphor; a modern vicissitude of a visual metaphor, whose voice – “entonación” – now enters the picture.

1 Seeing the Aleph: *Theoria* or *curiositas*?

At first sight, the Aleph seems to be the realization of the Greek contemplative ideal of *theoria*, “seeing what is”. In the Aleph, nothing is hidden behind mere appearances, there is nothing lying in the dark; the whole Universe, “objeto secreto y conjetural” (626) (“secret, hypothetical object”; 131), is illuminated and offers itself to sight. One is reminded of the ancient Greek universe and the original “brightness that fills the cosmos like a medium” (Blumenberg, \(^{46}\) It is interesting to note that Borges originally worked with the idea of a rectangular Aleph, like a tabernacle, which, as Elena del Río Parra and Julio Ortega remark, evokes the thick volume of an encyclopaedia (11).

\(^{47}\) In French in the original.
Light 34). All depth is abolished and the universe is reduced to a visible surface. Theoretical contemplation attains the apotheosis which its etymological root – *thea* – already suggested: divine omniscience. Yet, this apotheosis takes place in a dark basement and suggests au contraire, not so much a contemplative *theoria* as an idle *curiositas*. Indeed, after he has seen the Aleph, Borges can hear Daneri saying: “Tarumba te habrás quedado de tanto curiosear donde no te llaman .... Aunque te devanes los sesos, no me pagarás en un siglo esta revelación. Qué observatorio formidable, che Borges!” (626) (“Serves you right, having your mind boggled, for sticking your nose in where you weren’t wanted ....And you might rack your brains, but you’ll never repay me for the revelation – not in a hundred years. What a magnificent observatory, eh, Borges!”; 131). With this parody of a “revelation”, Daneri has conjured up the familiar constellation of motifs associated with *curiositas*: There is the reference to the “observatory” of the astronomer, ancient archetype of a vain curiosity; “vain”, as both seriously hubristic – associations of the dark and hermetic cellar with the arcane and the esoteric – and inconsequentially idle – the verb “curiosear” connotes a nosy, idle concern. First presented as a privileged place, an “observatory”, the Aleph carries at first the promise of a cosmic, contemplative *theoria*; but the Aleph is then described as a small, almost graspable, *object* of desire, full of wonder, whose fascinating yet distracting “vertiginosos espectáculos” (“dizzying spectacles”; 129) elicit an idle curiosity – the untranslatable verb “curiosear”. The hubristic theoretical aspiration to hold the universe in the mind in one totalizing vision is dissolved by a dissipating idle curiosity, superfluous concern for the inessential and contingent.

First described as a magical device, the Aleph affords, in the darkness of a cellar, a total vision which very much appears as some kind of hallucinatory and phantasmic spectacle. The theoretical gaze is usually imagined as a sovereign, divine gaze surveying from above, supreme phantasm for that other, soaring, human gaze which looks up interrogatingly at the heavens.
Borges exploits the farcical parallelism between the astronomer looking at the starred Universe from an attic and Carlos Argentino looking down at the Universe from his “observatory”, or rather through a peephole situated in a dark and humid basement. In the descent into the basement, there is an obvious allusion to many other famous descents: into the infernal netherworld, into a well, and, of course, descent into the Platonic cave. Yet, the Aleph, “pequeña esfera tornasolada de casi intolerable fulgor” (625) (“small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness”; 129) that seems to hold the solar promise of a total vision, is not attained as the result of an ascent but rather of a descent; its “vision” is thus more reminiscent of the the phantasmagoric play of shadows which the dwellers of the Platonic cave are forced to watch. As we saw in Canetti’s *Die Blendung*, the Platonic motif of the dazzling becomes equally ambivalent in the case of the Aleph: what seems a revelatory, illuminating, enlightening experience coincides with a blindness to the surrounding world: from metaphor of absolute knowledge to metaphor of utter ignorance. The Aleph’s underground phantasmic spectacle is a “fallen” version, a parody, of divine omniscience.

In the Postscript, Borges expresses his conviction that the Aleph of the calle Garay is a false one; quoting a (fictional) manuscript by Richard Burton, he compares it with other similar “artificios” and “instrumentos de óptica” (627) (“artifices [and] optical instruments”;133) Rather than the place of divine revelation, the Aleph would then be a (magical) artifact. In fact, despite its explicit cabbalistic and Ancient Greek roots, the Aleph is also imagined as a very modern

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48 The numerous allusions to Dante Alighieri – beginning with Daneri’s name itself – have been the object of an abundant secondary literature.

49 “La cave ressemble à un puits auquel on accède par un escalier étroit et abrupt. Cette image évoque divers épisodes d’ordre mythologique et biblique associés au fantasme du puits, – lieu d’origine au fond duquel on descend comme au cœur d’un labyrinthe sans fin” (Vigée 399). “The cave resembles a well to which we have access through narrow and steep stairs. This image evokes many mythological and Biblical episodes associated with the phantasm of the well – place of origin to which we descend as to the heart of an endless labyrinth” (my translation).
artifact. In one of his first visits to Daneri, Borges’s listens to Daneri’s pompous “vindicación del hombre moderno” (618) (“apologia for modern man” (120): “Lo evoco ... en su gabinete de estudio, como si dijéramos en la torre albarrana de una ciudad, provisto de teléfonos, de telégrafos, de fonógrafos, de aparatos de radiotelefónia, de cinematógrafos, de linternas mágicas, de glosarios, de horarios, de prontuarios, de boletines ...” (618) (“I picture him ... in his study, as though in the watchtower of a great city surrounded by telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, and the latest in radio-telephone and motion-picture and magic-lantern equipment, and glossaries and calendars and timetables and bulletins ...”; 120). The Aleph belongs to this list as a sort of ultimate artifact of modernity bringing to its paroxysm the dialectic between attention and distraction – and the parallel dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal curiosities – described by Jonathan Crary in Suspensions of Perception. For, from the top of his “torre albarrana” (“watchtower”), modern man aspires to a totalizing, surveying, panoptic vision, which ends up being shattered in fragments under the distracting pressure of so many centrifugal solicitations. Since Baudelaire at least, distraction and a fragmented subjectivity, often associated with urban life⁵⁰, are often considered as one of the fundamental marks of modernity. However, as Jonathan Crary has insightfully argued, however characteristic of modernity the experience of distraction might be, it goes hand in hand with its opposite, focused attention: “Modern distraction was not a disruption of stable or ‘natural’ kinds of sustained, value-laden perception that had existed for centuries but was an effect, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects” (49). The Aleph shining in the darkness of the

⁵⁰ At the end of the story, when Borges takes leave of Daneri, he advises him to “alejarse de la perniciosa metrópolis, que a nadie créame, que a nadie! perdona ... y le repetí que el campo y la serenidad son dos grandes médicos” (626) (“to remove himself from the pernicious influences of the metropolis which no one – believe me, no one! – can be immune to ... and told him again that the country – peace and quiet, you know – was the very best medicine one could take”; 131).
basement, exposes this dialectic by bringing it to its paroxysm. The contemplation of the Aleph can be compared to a hypnotic experience where “the border between a focused normative attentiveness and hypnotic trance was indistinct” (65). The hypnotic Aleph both concentrates the attention of the observer in a small sphere and dissolves attention in the infinity of its content: the observer becomes absorbed to distraction.

It is important to keep this dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal curiosities in mind when reading, for instance, Borges’s evocation of the Aleph. At first sight, the Aleph seems to afford a centrifugal proliferation of the imaginary, fertile ground for a fleeting curiosity wandering in a labyrinthine world of phantasmic particulars. Yet, what seems a drifting, centrifugal catalogue, is nonetheless gravitating around its original, unifying yet invisible centre. For, towards the end of Borges’ own evocation of the Aleph, when it seems that the Aleph has been shattered into a multitude of partial visions, centrifugal forces give suddenly way to an intense centripetal pull:

... vi tigres, émbolos, bisontes, marejadas y ejércitos, vi todas las hormigas que hay en la tierra, vi un astrolabio persa, vi un cajón del escritorio (y la letra me hizo temblar) cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas monumento en la Chacarita, vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo, vi la circulación de mi oscura sangre, vi el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte, vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en Aleph la tierra, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo .... (626)

... saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies, saw all the ants on the earth, saw a Persian astrolabe, saw in a desk drawer (and the handwriting made me tremble) obscene, incredible, detailed letters that Beatriz had sent Carlos Argentine, saw a beloved monument in Chacarita, saw the horrendous remains of what was once, deliciously, been Beatriz Viterbo, saw the circulation of my dark blood, saw the coils and springs of love and the alterations of death, saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the
Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy ... (130-1)

Abruptly, Borges phantasmagoria goes full circle back to its origin and source, the Aleph itself, but also the figure of the voyant voyeur.

Borges’s evocation of the infinite Aleph closes on itself, seemingly foreclosing any transcendence. It is in this sense that the Aleph might be false, similar to all the legendary mirrors which Burton is supposed to have mentioned in his manuscript: the mirror found “East to Iskandar dhu-al-Qarnayn”, “the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower”, “the mirror that Lucian from Samosata examined on the moon” or “Merlin’s universal mirror”. Sphere whose centre is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere, the Aleph is not a metaphor for the divinity, but rather, like in Pascal, a metaphor for Nature without God. And, as Pascal surmised, it is a frightful sphere indeed, not only because of man’s radical solitude in an infinite universe, but also because any striving towards transcendence meets the cold reflective surface of a mirror, locking the individual in a gigantic, yet closed, play of mirrors, as he is condemned to see himself in everything in a sort of primordial narcissism. As Borges remarks about his own literary work in the Epilogue to El hacedor: “Un hombre se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo. A lo largo de los años puebla un espacio con imágenes de provincias, de reinos, de montañas, de bahías, de islas, de peces, de habitaciones, de instrumentos, de astros, de caballos y de personas. Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara.” (854) (“A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays ships, islands, fishes, rooms instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face”; 183).
However, it would be reductive to regard the Aleph simply as an optical device offering a closed self-reflexive play of mirrors; “El Aleph” opens indeed to a “beyond”; to a form of prosaic transcendence. Compared to the Aleph, “El Aleph” offers a more mundane – yet more authentic – revelation, by casting a light onto the voyeuristic curieux themselves observing the Aleph through a true peephole. The difference between our two curieux is significant. In Daneri’s poem “The Earth”, the Aleph itself constitutes the blind spot of the poem: the poem presupposes a unique and stable point of view position that brings to mind Pierre Bourdieu’s observation on Descartes’s camara obscura and perspective: “La perspective suppose un point de vue sur lequel on ne prend pas de point de vue” (Méditations 33) (“Perspective presupposes a point a view on which no point of view can be taken”; 33). Daneri remains in an outside comfort zone of absolute detachment – which, according to himself, gives his poem “scientific rigor”. Compared to Daneri’s, Borges’s experience of the Aleph is more unsettling: his account culminates in an infinite, self-reflexive play of reflections. Yet, the opposition between Daneri and Borges’s rendering of the Aleph should not be regarded as the last interpretative horizon, for this opposition is in reality the false alternative noted by Bourdieu between the objectivist illusion of the “view from nowhere” and the illusion of ubiquity or “view from everywhere” pursued by postmodern “narcissistic reflexivity” (Bourdieu, Meditations 108). It is left to the narrative of “El Aleph” itself to reveal the blind spot of both curiosities, the common origin of both Daneri’s sovereign gaze and Borges’s infinite multiplicity of perspectives. The blind spot is none other than the hidden peephole from which one looks into the Aleph, offering the ridiculous spectacle of one’s own “great clumsy body” (“corpachón”) “stretched” (“repatingado”) on the basement floor.

In this ridiculing of lofty, disembodied human aspirations weighed down by the burdensome corporeality, it is difficult not to see a variation on the archetypical scene of theory,
that of Thales and the Thracian maid related by Socrates in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Daneri’s discovery of the Aleph when he was a child, his original fall down the stairs of the narrow cellar—resembling a well\(^{51}\)—reads like a true fall from knowledge. The revelation of the Aleph at the end of the fall does not make the cellar into the tempting well of omniscience it promises to be, but makes it instead a bottomless abyss opening into a vertiginous and hallucinatory phantasmagoria. If in Thales’s anecdote the phantasm of a surveying, divine view from nowhere\(^{52}\) to which Thales aspires crashed against the cold, hard reality of the well, in “El Aleph” the cold, hard reality of the cellar is the necessary pre-condition for the Aleph’s absolute “theoretical” vision. In Thales’ anecdote, we can see Socrates’ conflicted attitude toward that *skholè*, “free time, freed from the urgencies of the world” (Bourdieu, *Meditations* 1), which is fundamental to philosophers but is also at the origin of their penchant for distant things and their neglect of their social duties and daily urgencies of life. “The Aleph” stages a similar conflict, which would be common to the philosopher and the writer, only that the dark basement and the phantasmic Aleph make the bargain all the more Faustian. And, at the same time, the laughter of the Thracian Maid survives in Borges’s satirical take on the pedestrian and prosaic side of the Aleph’s panoptic apotheosis: while observing the whole universe as a disembodied, omniscient god, the body of the observer remains stretched out on a bag in the cellar. This is a reminder that Borges’s metaphysical lucubrations remain intellectual *games*, a reminder of Borges’ “carcajadas homéricas” (“Homeric laughter”)—if we believe Estela Campo (qtd. in Volek 96)—as he was

\(^{51}\) “[E]l sótano apenas más ancho que la escalera, tenía mucho de pozo” (624) (“barely wider than the stairway […] more like a well or cistern” (282).

\(^{52}\) Elsewhere in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes the philosopher as a strange creature, for only his body “sojourns in his city, while his thought, disdainful of such things as worthless, takes wing, as Pindar says, ‘beyond the sky, beneath the earth’, searching the heavens and measuring the plains, everywhere seeking true nature of everything as a whole, never sinking to what lies close at hand.”
writing his *ficciones*. We can also see in this story, of which a fictional Borges himself is the protagonist, a cautionary narrative of literature’s epistemological ambitions. In his unbounded curiosity, the erudite Borges might have harboured the phantasm of an absolute knowledge, of a total vision, yet this “serious” aspiration never takes flight, self-consciously weighed down as it is by the figure of the pedantic and cumbersome Daneri, Borges’s ridiculous alter ego. Or, conversely, we could consider that it is the intellectual game that is ponderous and that the farcical turn of the story provides a counterbalancing light note. Tale of an all-devouring, totalizing, theoretical curiosity, “El Aleph” is reduced to a mere literary curiosity, a mere amused, distracting intellectual exercise.

The hidden, “dirty”, little secret of a lofty theoretical curiosity turns out to be an obscene peephole curiosity. What appeared at first as a metaphor for the Greek ideal of contemplative *theoria*, even as a form of *vita contemplativa* removed from the public sphere and turned to the revelation of the divine, seems in fact closer to the nosy curiosity of a spectator. In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt points to this subtle distinction in the shift from Greek *theoria* to Latin *curiositas*. *Theoria* and *curiositas* are rooted in opposite models of spectatorship and withdrawal. As Arendt observes, contemplative *theoria* requires a withdrawal from human affairs and the care of the body. However, this withdrawal involves a true ascetic discipline and differs therefore from a base curiosity who only seeks the anonymity and safety of a hidden spectator – Lucretius’s image of curiosity is that of a spectator who is watching a wild storm from the safe shore. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Trial of Theoretical Curiosity*, Hans Blumenberg quotes an 18th century letter from the abbé Galiani indirectly responding to an article on curiosity by Voltaire and pointing out “daß zwar das Gefühl des Glücks nicht aus der Befriedigung der Neugierde resultiert, daß diese aber umgekehrt das sicherste Symptom des Glück sei” (qtd in 475) (“that the feeling of happiness did not indeed result from the satisfaction
of curiosity, but rather, conversely, curiosity is the surest symptom of happiness”; 406). In line with Lucretius’s onlooker who observes a shipwreck from the security of the shore, Galiani evokes the curiosity of the spectator in a theatre:

[D]ie ästhetische Situation des Zuschauers im Shauspiel … die bestimmt sei durch die Unanfechtbarkeit seines Sitzplatzes von der Gefahr und Verwirrung der Handlung, die er auf der Bühne sich abspielen sieht. Diesen behaglichen Logenplatz, den weder Regen noch Sonne erreichen, dieses artifizielle Maximum der Distanz zwischen Wirklichkeit und Standort des Zuschauers, für den selbst nicht zu handeln und handeln zu brauchen die Bedingung seines Glücksgefühls ist. (475)

[T]he aesthetic situation of the spectator in a theatre ... defined by his position’s invulnerability to the danger and confusion of the action that he watches running its course on the stage. This comfortable private box, which is reached by neither rain or sun, this artificial maximum of the distance between reality and the standpoint of the spectator, from whom his inaction and the absence of any need for him to act are the conditions of his happy feeling. (qtd. in 406-7)

Galiani adds that “Fast alle Wissenshaften sind nur Neugierden, und der Schlüssel zum Ganzen ist, daß das neugierige Wesen von vornherein sicher sein und sich in einer behaglichen Lage befinden muß” (476) (“almost all sciences are only curiosities, and the key to the whole is that from the beginning the curious being must be secure and in comfortable condition”; 407). In the Aleph, both the theoretical ideal and curiosity are brought to their complementary excess, at which point they seem to collapse into each other. Borges seems in fact to be combining the imagery of these two (in principle) antagonistic curiosities: on the one hand, the exiguous, isolated, dark cellar irresistibly suggests a monastic cell and monkish discipline. At the same time, lying down on a pillow the observer is compared to a dreamer lost in an oniric cosmic spectacle.
Curiosity appears therefore as radically ambivalent, disciplinary yet pleasurable. Rather than happiness, as Galiani would have it, the curieux seems to experience a form of Lacanian jouissance, pleasure in pain, having to do with the compulsive repetition of (the death) drive. Arendt already observed that Lucretian curiosity, the “sheer lust for seeing can be ascribed only to an immature irrational drive that endangers our very existence” (140). Earlier, the figure of Daneri in his “observatory” of sorts has been compared to that of an astronomer; the conflation of the figure of the astronomer with that of a pervert or voyeur can be found in Brecht’s Galileo in whose notes we read the following observation about Galileo’s curiosity:

Der Forschungstrieb, ein soziales Phänomen, kaum weniger lustvoll oder diktatorisch wie der Zeugungstrieb, dirigiert Galilei auf das so gefährliche Gebiet, treibt ihn in den peinvollen Konflikt mit seinen heftigen Wünschen nach anderen Vergnügen. Er erhebt das Fernrohr zu den Gestirnen und liefert sich der Folter aus. Am Ende betreibt er seine Wissenschaft wie ein Laster, heimlich, wahrscheinlich mit Gewissensbissen. (463)

The inquisitive drive, a social phenomenon scarcely less lustful or dictatorial than the procreative drive, directs Galileo into this dangerous territory, drives him into painful conflict with his intense wishes for other satisfactions. He lifts the telescope to stars and delivers himself over to torture. In the end, he practices his science like a vice, secretly, probably with pangs of conscience (qtd. in Blumenberg Trial 395).

This obscene, compulsive curiosity looks more and more like that Freudian Wissbegier, autonomous, demonic “epistemological drive” which tends to become an end in itself and disregard any other vital concerns. In the always unsuccessful attempt to grasp and capture the Aleph, we find the relentlessness of a demonic drive, working tirelessly in the darkest recesses of psyche, indifferent to the life-world above ground.
2 Saying the ineffable Aleph

Borges concludes his story by suggesting that, following Burton, the true Aleph is in Cairo: “Los fieles que concurren a la mezquita de Amr, en le Cairo, saben muy bien que el universo está dentro de de unas columnas de piedra que rodean el patio central... Nadie, claro está, puede verlo, pero quienes acercan el oído a la superficie, declaran percibir, al poco tiempo, su atareado rumor” (628) (“The faithful who come to the Amr mosque in Cairo, know very well that the universe lies inside one of the stone columns that surround the central courtyard... No one of course, can see it, but those who put their ear to the surface claim to hear, within a short time, the bustling rumour of it”; 133). The true Aleph cannot be seen, only heard. In this final evocation of the “rumour” of the world voiced by the “true” Aleph, the Aleph seems to recover a meaning more in accordance with its etymology. As Borges acknowledges in the middle of his narrative, the problem posed by the Aleph is that it cannot be said: “Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí mi desesperación de escritor” (624) (“I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer’s hopelessness begins”; 129). According to the cabbalistic tradition, the Aleph can only be uttered by God; indeed, its utterance was even thought to have been the real revelation on Mount Sinai. Borges skilfully blends the motif of the ineffable with that of the un-representable: just as the Aleph is said to be ineffable, the universe which the Aleph encapsulates is described as “inconcebible” (“unconceivable”). Likewise, the paradoxically silent Aleph is comparable to the un-representable emblems used by the mystics to represent the divinity: the limitless sphere but also the Persian image of “un pájaro que de algún modo es todos los pájaros”, Ezequiel’s “angel de cuatro caras que a un tiempo se dirige al Oriente y al Occidente, al Norte y al Sur” (625) (“a bird that somehow is all birds”, “an angel with four faces, facing east and west, north and south at once”; 129). Just as the Aleph is the silent letter that cannot be heard, all of these images are impossible to visualize, for in them
identity and non-identity are subsumed. But the Aleph is primarily concerned with the different possible strategies to say the unspeakable. In this respect, there is a tension in the short story between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between, on the one hand, the pithiness of the unrepresentable emblems and the ineffable Aleph of the mystics; and, on the other hand, more imaged but verbose “literary” strategies.

“Literature” does not seem to fare well in “El Aleph”. Carlos Argentino Daneri’s pompous “apology of modern man” sounds typically “literary” to Borges, and not for the good reasons: “Tan ineptas me parecieron esas ideas, tan pomposa y tan vasta su exposición, que las relacioné inmediatamente con la literatura” (618) (“So witless did these ideas strike me as being, so sweeping and pompous the way they were expressed, that I associated them immediately with literature”; 120). Literature is here understood as the prolix and prosaic, secular, inheritor of that “divine” Poetry which Shelley could still invoke: “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all others systems of thought” (36). Looking at the Aleph from his isolated and dark basement, Carlos Argentino Daneri appears as a caricature of blind Homeric uates; one is also reminded of Tiresias, the blind “seer”, a figure for whom Modernism had a particular predilection and a role in which an aging and progressively blind Borges will eventually indulge, not without a dose of amused irony. As we have already mentioned, critics have also noted a direct allusion to Dante Alighieri in Daneri53. In fact, the full name of Daneri, Carlos Argentino, makes him a caricature of the foundational national epic poet: not without bitter irony, Borges informs the reader in the Postscript that Daneri won the “Segundo Premio Nacional de Literatura” (626-7) (“second place

53 At the same time, Daneri behaves as a Vergil guiding Borges in his descent.
in the National Prize for Literature”; 132). Daneri’s encyclopaedic poem, “The Earth”, can therefore be read as a parody of the Ancient epic poems’ ambition to be a compendium of all the knowledge of their times; Homer’s *Odyssey* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* are among the many erudite allusions which seem so pedantic and contrived to Borges. However, for Borges, Daneri’s fastidious – and tedious – encyclopaedic aspiration evokes the mediocrity of later epic epigones like the Renaissance poet Michael Drayton who, in his “topographical epic” *Polyalbion*, “recorded the fauna, flora, hydrography, orography, military and monastic history of England” (277). In the end, Daneri’s scientific poem seems therefore a product not so much of the *uates* prophetic sight – whose total vision is anchored in time – but of an ultimately idle curiosity arrested on the spectacle of a universe suspended in time.

The “revelatory” experience of the Aleph takes place in an “instante gigantesco” (625) (“unbounded moment”; 129); to this “bad eternity” corresponds the “bad infinity” of Daneri’s endless enumeration (625). The stanzas which Daneri inflicts on Borges are followed by the poetaster’s equally overblown exegetic commentary. It is not gratuitous to speak of exegesis. In *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* Gershom Scholem refers to Rabbi Mendel’s further elaboration of Maimonides’ interpretation of the revelation on mount Sinai according to which “[a]ll that Israel heard was the *aleph* with which the Hebrew text of the first Commandment begins” (30). Mute consonant, the *aleph* is considered the “source of all articulated sound ... but in itself conveys no determinate, specific meaning” (30). It was Moses that, in a gesture grounding religious authority, translated it into human language. This first translation will in turn

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54 Daneri praises his own poem for its “scientific rigor” (279).

55 The presence of the Cabbala in Borges has been the object of many studies (See XXX). According to Jaime Alazraki, Gershom Scholem can be considered a direct source of Borges’s cabbalistic references, especially, in the Aleph (*Prosa* 92).
give way to centuries of commentaries and exegeses; in a similar vein, Borges mentions in “La esfera de Pascal” Hermes Trimegistus who was believed to have dictated a variable number of books – “42, según Clemente de Alejandría; 20000 según Jámblico; 36525 según los sacerdotes de Thoth” (“42, according to Clement of Alexandria; 20,000, according to Iamblichus; 36,525, according to the priest of Thoth”; 350) – in which everything is written. More explicitly than in “El Aleph”, Borges’s famous ficción “La biblioteca de Babel” illustrates this progressive drift away from the original Word, as we are progressively submerged in a sea of words; it is as though in its attempt to regain the original simplicity of the Word only a “fuite en avant” was possible, building ever more splendid discursive edifices, which, like Daneri’s The Earth, in their all-encompassing scope get muddled up in details and are bound to be regarded as inconsequential, idle digressions, a “pedantesco farrago ... que parecía dilatar hasta el infinito las posibilidades de la cacofonía y del caos” (621-2) (“pedantic farrago ... that seemed to draw out to infinity the possibilities of cacophony and chaos”; 125).

Ironically, Daneri’s overblown and ultimately insignificant epic is rooted in a naïve faith in language and its ability to say the ineffable. By contrast, Borges introduces his own rich yet economical evocation of the Aleph by acknowledging the difficulty of the task:

En ese instante gigantesco he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré. (625)

In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was simultaneous; what I shall write is successive, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture. (129)
In the contemplation of the Aleph, there is no centrifugal curiosity for all things “ocupan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia” (625) (“occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency”; 129). It is only when this experience is evoked by memory and couched in language that we can speak of a centrifugal curiosity whose vagaries deploy themselves in time and space. The link between what we have called a visual curiosity and a textual curiosity is here evident. Any attempt to render the content of the Aleph will inevitably be incomplete and arbitrary, a heterogeneous bric-a-brac of “things”, a true literary cabinet de curiosités of the most disparate, unrelated sights, a chaotic labyrinth of particulars without any apparent semblance of order. Yet, and this is a highly significant aspect of Borges’ poetics, rather than choosing silence or the terse emblems of the mystics – which he also dismisses as “polluted with literature, with falseness” (129) – Borges decides nonetheless, like the much derided Daneri, to capture the Aleph through an enumeration, a catalogue, but of a different sort. The limits of language and the failure of language to say the world have been considered as the central problem of “The Aleph”. In line with Foucault in Les mots et les choses, Alazraki argues that, in “El Aleph”, “el lenguaje deja de ser un traductor de la realidad para convertirse en un generador de realidad” (297) (“language ceases to be a translator of reality to become a generator of it”) (my translation). This new reality is literature. Yet, at the same time and as we will see, while acknowledging that language certainly has its limitations, Borges retains a certain faith in the ability of language to communicate and point to the pitfalls awaiting those who completely indulge in the fantastic – and phantasmic – “reality” of literature.

The contrast between Daneri and Borges’s enumerative strategies rests on another side of the sphere’s ambivalence that we have already mentioned. In his poem, Daneri takes the
sphericity of the Aleph as a literal metaphor for the planet’s surface which he attempts to describe in its entirety proceeding as a surveyor; as Borges amusingly informs: “en 1941 ya había despachado unas hectáreas del estado de Queensland, más de un kilómetro del curso del Ob, un gasómetro al norte de Veracruz ...” (620) (“by 1941 he had already dispatched several hectares of the state of Queensland, more than a kilometre of the course of the Ob, a gasworks north of Veracruz ...”; 122). In his attempt to “versificar toda la redondez del planeta” (emphasis added) (“versify the entire planet”; 122), his necessarily incomplete catalogue dissolves into an arbitrary and haphazard “pedantesco fárrago”. In contrast, Borges’s catalogue pierces through the alephical sphere’s surface and renders its ultimately shapeless and infinite content in the form of an arbitrary and haphazard juxtaposition, which, as it turns out, suggests new harmonies and orderings. Following Borges’s own comments on “El Aleph”, Jaime Alazraki likens Borges’ enumeration to the “chaotic enumerations” observed by Leo Spitzer in Whitman which paradoxically express “el sentido perfecto de la unidad de la naturaleza” (qtd. in Alazraki 93). As Borges already suggested (“El Aleph” 84), what seems at first sight a random and unmotivated jumble of things reveals upon closer inspection “a unity governed by secret affinities, complementary oppositions, and subtle patternings” (Thiem 116).

In contrast with Daneri’s, Borges’ centrifugal curiosity is not regarded as necessarily dispersing and futile, for in the end it might produce new associations, new knowledge. This is the same curiosity that Foucault praises in the passage of “Le philosophe masque” that we already cited in the Introduction, but that is particularly relevant in this context:

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56 Borges’ catalogue has been the object of innumerable studies. Jon Thiem lists (partially) the sources in p. 116, n.20.
La curiosité est un vice qui a été stigmatisé tour à tour par le christianisme, par la philosophie et même par une certaine conception de la science. Curiosité, futility. Le mot pourtant me plaît; il me suggère tout autre chose : il évoque le ‘souci’; il évoque le soin qu’on prend de ce qui existe et pourrait exister; un sens aiguisé du réel mais qui s’immobilise jamais devant lui; une promptitude à trouver étrange et singulier ce qui nous entoure; un certain acharnement à nous défaire de nos familiarités et à regarder autrement les mêmes choses; une ardeur à saisir ce qui se passe et ce qui passe; une désinvolture à l’égard des hiérarchies traditionnelles entre l’important et l’essentiel. (“Masqué” 927-8)

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes ‘concern’; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential. (328)

This modern praise of curiosity is in line with the reappraisal of distraction that we mentioned earlier; it is a return of sorts to a pre-disciplinary curiosity, to that naive curiosity that looked at the world in awe and wonder. What we have here is a variation of the Baudelarian motif of the flâneur, whose epistemological potential will be later on developed by Walter Benjamin. Under the modern garments of the flâneur, the curieux is not necessarily an anachronistic, irrelevant figure dissipating his life in harmless and insignificant intellectual pastimes. Idleness can indeed be productive of a new kind of knowledge; as Benjamin remarks in the Arcades: “Basic to flânerie, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor. The flâneur, as is well known, makes ‘studies. ... Most men of genius were great flâneurs – but industrious, productive flâneurs” (453). In the figure of the flâneur, idle curiosity needs not be passive. It is in fact both passive and active: Borges seems a perfect exponent of
this dilettantish yet productive curiosity, idle, fleeting, working on the margins of the disciplined and specialized pursuit of knowledge. Many of his stories and essays are such “studies”, brief intellectual *flâneries* in the immense labyrinth of written culture, comparable to the metaphorical role of Benjamin’s Arcades in the modern metropolis: shortcuts generating sparks of knowledge.

However, for Borges, this curiosity that Foucault will praise is not necessarily subversive of established orders and hierarchies, but rather the counterpart of that other curiosity behind these same orders and hierarchies. The *flâneries*, digressions, wanderings of Borges’ curious mind are underpinned and structured by a totalising desire. The total vision, the absolute order or overarching system is not only a recurrent theme, but also the hidden backdrop against which Borges roams the universal library. A true measure of the distance that separates Borges from Foucault is given by the latter’s reaction, a “laughter” mixed with a certain “malaise” (*Mots* 9) (“uneasiness”; xx), to that famous exotic – and fictional – animal taxonomy from Borges’s “Chinese encyclopaedia”. Opening quotation of *Les Mots et les choses*, this taxonomy that to us appears as a chaotic catalogue of the heterogeneous is what inspired Foucault to think about the underlying space, the epistemological field, or “episteme”, which makes possible the emergence of such orderings. Yet, Borges’ reference to the Chinese encyclopaedia can be found in an essay, “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” (“John Wilkins’ Analytical Language”), in which Borges demonstrates a fascination for orders and system-builders. Borges begins his essay by pinpointing the guilty omission of John Wilkins in the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica despite the fact that: “Éste abundó en felices curiosidades: le interesaron la teología, la criptografía, la música, la fabricación de colmenas transparentes, el curso de un planeta invisible, la posibilidad de un viaje a la luna, la posibilidad y los principios de un lenguaje mundial” (706) (He was full of happy curiosity: interested in theology, cryptography, music, the manufacture of transparent beehives, the course of an invisible planet, the possibility of a trip to
the moon, the possibility and the principles of a world language‖; 229). No matter how much pleasure Borges derives from putting his finger on “las arbitrariedades de Wilkins, del desconocido (o apócrifo) enciclopedista chino” (708) (“the arbitrariness of Wilkins, the unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist”; 231), their classifications exert a powerful fascination on him, however ludicrously eccentric they might appear to us. For, Borges argues: “La imposibilidad de penetrar el esquema divino del universo no puede, sin embargo, disuadirnos de planear esquemas humanos, aunque nos conste que éstos son provisorios” (708) (“The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot, however, dissuade us from planning human schemes, even though it is clear that they are provisional”; 231).

Between Borges and Foucault there is therefore mainly a difference of attitude towards taxonomies and classifications: while the latter tends to regard hierarchies and orders as repressive and all-reaching disciplinary structures of normalization and control, Borges still sees them, in their tragic dimension of a pre-disciplinary age, as ingenious constructs deploying their poignantly fragile structures in the face of an unknowable and seemingly chaotic universe.

Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile and N. J. Thrift point out in *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*: “Borges is driven to celebrate a life led in curiosity, while Foucault laughs nervously about classification systems that are both bizarre and binding” (18). While Wilkins’s curiosity, his passion for order and classifications, might have made Foucault nervous, that

57 In the much quoted ending of “Avatares de la Tortuga” (“Avatars of the Tortoise”), Borges surmises that we have dreamed the world: “Lo hemos soñado resistente, misterioso, visible, ubicuo en el espacio y firme en el tiempo; pero hemos consentido en su arquitectura tenues y eternos intersticios de sin razón para saber que es falso” (258) (“we have dreamed it to be resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space, and fixed in time; but we have permitted tenuous and eternal interstices of illogic a reason in its architecture in order to know that it is false”; 108-9). Very often what is highlighted is Borges’ mischievous pleasure in pointing at those interstices of nonsense and not so much the equal pleasure he derives from evoking the formidable “architectures” of the world which are also made from the same stuff that dreams are made.
curiosity is the twin sister of that other curiosity praised by the same Foucault as “a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things”.

Daneri’s desire to give an exhaustive account of the surface of the Earth might seem ridiculous, yet something of this striving survives in Borges’ attempt to “say” the Aleph. Daneri is indeed Borges’ alter ego, or rather his self-parody. The same tension can be found in his short essay on infinity, “Avatares de la tortuga”, in which Borges begins by claiming that “[c]inco, siete años de aprendizaje metafísico, teológico, me capacitarían (tal vez) para planear decorosamente ese libro” (254) (“five, seven years of metaphysical, theological, and mathematical apprenticeship would enable me to plan such a book properly”; 105) only to dismiss the idea by adding “[i]nútil agregar que la vida me prohíbe esa esperanza y aun ese adverbio” (254) (“[i]t is unnecessary to add that life denies me that hope, and even that adverb”; 105). We could see in that adverb, “decorosamente”, an allusion to the rhetorical decorum, which Daneri with his pompous style and his epic enumerations hilariously misjudges; paradoxically, the appropriate style for such an elevated and unlimited subject might in fact be a low and pedestrian style, and the more convenient genre, the short form. Returning to “The Aleph”, Jon Thiem argues that “the brevity of the list in the face of the totality for which it is meant to stand elicits a feeling of concentration” (116). To be true to its subject, as much as this is possible, any account of the Aleph must strike a delicate balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Eventually, it is the “The Aleph” itself, as a short fiction, which provides the best response to Daneri’s unfinished epic The Earth; as Thiem insightfully observes, Borges’ short story functions as an Aleph, thus epitomizing the multum in parvo:

58 Thiem lists the parallelism between the two: “Like Borges Daneri held a “subordinate position in an unreadable library,” “a cargo subalterno en una biblioteca ilegible”, a library named after Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur, who was a paternal ancestor of Borges...
The *multum* relates to the story richness – its inexhaustible allusiveness and byzantine convolution – while the *parvum* refers to its brevity. The complexity of “The Aleph” would approach chaos were it not for the fact that, in spite of centrifugal features – the far-ranging erudition, haphazard inventories, the postscript – the story achieves a remarkable coherence of subject and form. (113)

3 The lost Aleph

As we have already said, the Aleph appears at first as the attainment of the ultimate theoretical vision where everything is revealed and nothing is left in the dark. Borges is bringing to its undoing paroxysm the “métaphore photologique”, metaphor of light (and shadows), which Derrida considers as the foundational metaphor of Western metaphysics. In fact, everything in the Aleph, the emphasis on the visual, the simultaneous and the spatial, speaks to what Derrida sees as Western metaphysics’ obsession with “form”. Accordingly, the spherical Aleph appears as a sort of supreme perfect “form”: in “La esfera de Pascal”, Borges begins his history of the spherical metaphor with “el rápsoda Jenofánes de Colofón, [quién] fustigó a los poetas que atribuyeron rasgos antropomórficos a los dioses y propuso a los griegos un solo Dios, que era una esfera eterna” (636). However, rather than as a divinity, the very small spherical Aleph located in the underground darkness appears as a parody of the divinity, a sort of glowing idol. It is precisely the very materiality of the Aleph in the narrative that is striking; that Aleph that Daneri introduces to Borges as “nuestro concreto amigo proverbial, el multum in parvo” (624) (“the *multum in parvo* made flesh”; 128). In *Borges devant la Kabbale juive*, Claude Vigée remarks:

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59 See in particular “Force et signification” in *L’écriture et la différence* (45).
L’Aleph du conte de Borges est donc doué de qualités concrètes et sensibles, au cœur de l’espace-temps de ce monde : c’est un Aleph un peu païen sur les bords. Bien que caché aux regards profanes, il participe déjà de l’univers créé. Au contraire, dans la Kabbale juive dont Borges s’est inspiré, l’Aleph, d’abord une simple lettre-consonne de l’alphabet, demeure toujours un signe abstrait qui ne fait vraiment partie du monde extérieur. Il ne se situe pas physiquement dans l’espace, ne possède pas de substance propre, ne s’investit jamais dans l’immanence. Nature et histoire lui demeurent étrangères. (399)

The Aleph in Borges’s fiction displays concrete and tangible qualities within the space-time coordinates: it is a somewhat pagan Aleph. Although hidden to the uninitiated, it is already part of the created universe. On the contrary, in the Jewish Kabbala, source of inspiration for Borges, the Aleph is a letter-consonant which remains an abstract sign that does not belong to the external world. It is not physically located in space, has no substance, and does not belong to the immanent. Nature and history are foreign to it. (my translation)

Borges’s Aleph is actually located in Buenos Aires in a house of the calle Garay. Borges’s short story exploits this profound and farcical contrast between the prosaic and contingent circumstances surrounding the Aleph, and the disembodied total vision it affords.

The interplay between the singular and the generic, the particular and the universal, is indeed at the heart of Borges’s “ symbolism”. Jaime Alazraki observes that Borges “proyecta lo individual sobre un plano más amplio, y tanto lo singular se explica en lo genérico como lo genérico en lo singular”. However, the Aleph makes for a very singular particular, especially if we compare it to other examples of the microcosmic multum in parvo in Borges. In the volume El Aleph, there is another short story intimately linked to “El Aleph”: “El Zahir”. In this story, it is a normal and perfectly common coin of “twenty cents” which becomes the “Thing”, an obsessive idea, idée fixe, which the narrator cannot forget. According to a fictitious treatise
quoted by the narrator, “Zahir” refers to “los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser inolvidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente” (593) (“beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad”; 85).

Among these objects and beings are mentioned a copper astrolabe and a magic tiger. Interestingly, in Borges’s story, it is a most banal and insignificant thing, a coin of twenty cents, exchangeable for thousands of other similar coins, that is elevated to the “Thing”. The closing line of the story reads: “quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios” (595) (“perhaps behind the coin is God”; 88). The Zahir could then be viewed as illustrative of Borges’s pantheism; according to Alazraki: “la idea panteísta de que todo puede ser todo, de que lo divino puede alojarse y ser lo más banalmente profano, a través de una figura que no solo concilia los opuestos, sino que les otorga una expresividad nueva” (96) (“the pantheist idea that everything can be in everything, that the divine can be found in the more banally profane, by means of a figure that not only reconciles the opposites, but grants them a renewed expressivity” (my translation). The narrator seems indeed to sanction such a reading:

Dijo Tennyson que si pudiéramos comprender una sola flor sabríamos quiénes somos y qué es el mundo. Tal vez quiso decir que no hay hecho, por humilde que sea, que no implique la historia universal y su infinita concatenación de efectos y de causas. Tal vez quiso decir que el mundo visible se da entero en cada representación, de igual manera que la voluntad según Schopenhauer, se da entera en cada sujeto. Los cabalistas entendieron que el hombre es un microcosmo, un simbólico espejo del universo; todo según Tennyson, lo sería. Todo hasta el intolerable Zahir. (595)

Tennyson said that if we could but understand a single flower we might know who we are and what the world is. Perhaps he was trying to say that there is nothing, however humble, that does not imply the history of the world and its infinite concatenation of causes and effects. Perhaps he was trying to say that the visible world can be seen entire in every image, just as Schopenhauer tells us that the Will expresses itself entire in every
man and woman. The Kabbalists believed that man is a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; if one were to believe Tennyson, everything would be – everything, even the unbearable Zahir. (87)

There is something farcically ironical, even satirical, in the idea of finding God behind a coin, one of the idols men so keenly worship. The allusion to Tennyson’s flower and, earlier on in the story, to a rose\(^{60}\) announces a short story in *El Hacedor*, “La rosa amarilla”. This microcosmic micro-story recounts the final, fleeting vision of Giambattista Marino in his deathbed:

Entonces ocurrió la revelación. Marino vio la rosa, como Adán pudo verla en el Paraíso, y sintió que ella estaba en su eternidad y no en sus palabras y que podemos mencionar o aludir pero no expresar y que los altos y soberbios volúmenes que formaban en un ángulo de la sala una penumbra de oro no eran (como su vanidad sonó) un espejo del mundo, sino una cosa más agregada al mundo. (795)

Then the revelation occurred. Marino saw the rose, as Adam had seen it in Paradise, and he realized that it lay within its own eternity, not within his words, and that we might speak about the rose, allude to it, but never truly express it, and that the tall, haughty volumes that made a golden dimness in the corner of his room were not (as his vanity had dreamed them) a mirror of the world, but just another thing added to the world’s contents. (160)

With this story, we can measure the distance that separates this ineffable, divine revelation of the rose from the equally ineffable yet profane “revelation” of the Aleph. While there is in the rose – even in the Zahir – an unequivocal pantheistic symbolism, the particular (the rose, the “common twenty-centavo coin”) pointing to the universal (God), the Aleph, on the contrary, is the mere materialization of the universal into a “thing”, the universal made object, pure yet

\(^{60}\)“El Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Veil” (594) (“the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil”; 86)
somewhat abstract thing-ness. Like the revelation of the rose, the revelation of the Aleph is ineffable and transient, a “gigantic instant” which seems to last an eternity; but at the same time, in the darkness of the basement, the spherical Aleph is also a “thing” like those volumes which “were not (as his vanity had dreamed them) a mirror of the world, but just another thing added to the world’s contents” (160).

Reduced to a “thing”, the infinite and “unconceivable” universe becomes a “graspable” object of desire. As such, the Aleph is the object not only of a disembodied *concupiscientia oculorum* – Augustinian lust of the eyes – but also of a remnant Adamic gluttony. According to a prevalent “ocularocentrism”, the “desire to know” is regarded as a prolongation of the “desire to see”, thus concealing the fact that the desires to see and to know are in fact extensions of a “lower” digestive desire or appetite to incorporate – Adorno speaks of systems of thought as “the belly turned mind” (*Negative Dialectics*, 23). Once more, Borges’s observation that the Aleph of the story might be a false one is further substantiated. As Vigée reminds us, the authentic Aleph cannot be possessed: “Muet, il demeure toujours hors de portée. Il échappe à notre rapacité. À notre insatiable convoitise orale. À notre obsession malsaine de mettre la dent et la griffe sur tout. […] L’Aleph authentique épuise notre désir de posséder, de maîtriser, de dominer l’univers créé” (407-8) (“Mute, it remains forever beyond grasp. It escapes our rapaciousness, our insatiable oral appetite, our unhealthy obsession to get our teeth and our claws into everything. The authentic Aleph exhausts our desire to own, to dominate the created universe”) (my translation). To a certain extent, the Aleph encapsulates the fundamental epistemological ambivalence between a desire to incorporate the world – echo of man’s original oral stage – and a desire to abandon oneself to it. This is the dialectic between “l’amour du réel et la connaissance
du réel” (145) that Gaston Bachelard notes in *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*. Carlos Daneri’s hubris is precisely to think the Aleph can be owned and captured in a poem; inevitably, the “*inajenable*” Aleph will become a metaphor for his own *enajenación* (“mental alienation”) and his encyclopaedic poem will crumble into a fragmented and chaotic vision. It is because Borges seems to abandon himself to a hypnotic contemplation of the Aleph, to its infinite and irreducible heterogeneity that he approaches the phantasm of bringing together a fragmented universe by “capturing” the Aleph in an exercise of delicate rhetorical acrobatics.

However, in its very thingness, the Aleph remains profoundly contradictory; for, how is it possible that “that secret, hypothetical object”, “the unconceivable universe” (131), would take a form, and such a precise form – a small sphere of two to three centimetres of diameter? It is as if the necessary obverse for the revelation of the “unconceivable universe”, the disembodied total vision, was a secret, underground, precipitate of pure, irreducible materiality. In “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins”, Borges proclaims: “no sabemos qué cosa es el universo. … Cabe ir más lejos; cabe sospechar que no hay universo en el sentido orgánico, unificador, que tiene esa ambiciosa palabra” (708) (“we do not know what the universe is. … We must go even further, and suspect that there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense of that ambitious word”; 231). In other words, the “universe” would then be nothing more than a word, though a libidinally charged word, a mere phantasmic projection of our mind. Not so much the result of a divine Will as the product of a human desire. In its materiality, the spherical Aleph is a coalescence of that desire. This psychologisation of the Aleph, the idea that the universe is just a projection of our

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61 He quotes Oscar Pfiste about two coexisting tendances: “s’emparer du monde extérieur, de l’attirer à lui ... et la tendance opposée qui voudrait qu’il s’abandonne au monde du dehors” (qtd. in 145).

62 “Es mío, es mío: yo lo descubrí en la niñez antes de la edad escolar. ... Código en mano, el doctor Zunni probará que es *inajenable* mi Aleph” (623) (“It’s mine, it’s mine; I discovered it in my childhood, before I ever attended school. ... Lawbook in hand, Zunni will prove that y Aleph is *inalienable*; 126-7),

mind, a representation of our will, is another example of Borges’s Schopenhauerism. The Aleph provides a good counterpoint to that paragraph already quoted from _El Hacedor_’s Epilogue, “Un hombre se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo. ... Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara.” (854) (A man sets out to draw the world.... A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face; 183); the Aleph’s total picture of the world, infinite and meaningless, mirrors this time our own infinite and meaningless desire.

Therefore what is striking about the Aleph is not so much its materiality as the fact that it makes for a strange “spectral” object: for, it is simultaneously, a phantasmatic concentration of the “external” world, and the materialization of an “internal” desire. This reading of the Aleph as belonging to both to the objective and subjective realms is not unlike the Cabbalistic Aleph in which it is inspired. According to the cabbalistic mystical tradition, the Aleph cannot be understood as external; for, the Aleph cannot be heard, “[i]l resonne en nous par le truchement de son silence” (404). Vigée compares it to the image of the Biblical “pierre angulaire” (“cornerstone”) “sur laquelle repose tout l’édifice cosmique” but also “foyer de formation obscur, noyau igné” (404), presence of the divine “dans le recès le plus secret de notre âme incarné » (407). In Borges’s secular, “pagan” (Vigée) version, the Aleph is not an opening to transcendence nor does it mark the presence of the divine in us; on the contrary, as the exteriorization of an internal desire, Borges’s Aleph seems cut of any transcendence, locked in the circle of radical ontological closure; a profoundly demonic object for, at the same time, by being an exteriorization of desire, it highlights the foreign and alienating dimension of that desire. The location of the Aleph in the basement of Daneri’s house has undeniable metaphorical overtones. The Aleph belongs to the house as that which is most innermost and private yet, at the same time, in contact, according to Bachelard in _La poétique de l’espace_, with dark, menacing
primeval “subterranean forces”, with the unconscious which Freud located in his topographical model in the depths of the individual psyche with its primal, repressed desires.

In fact, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, Julia Kristeva devotes a section to Borges’s Aleph and likens the descent into the basement to the aesthetic task which consists in “a descent into the foundations of the speaking subject” (...). In the Aleph, we have, according to Kristeva, a paradigmatic instance of the abject, very elusive notion whose contours Kristeva delineates with a variety of partial definitions. In principle, the abject is related to that Freudian lost “‘object’ of primal repression” (22), paradoxical ‘object’ whose loss precedes and ushers the subject/object differentiation. The Aleph would then be, according to Kristeva, the “‘object’ of literature” 63. It is interesting to compare the status of this “object” in the different accounts of the Aleph in the narrative. First of all, in Daneri’s epic poem, “The Earth”, the Aleph is certainly the repressed object, the object that is “lacking in the field of the picture” (Žižek, *Fantasy* 159), and yet whose “exclusion functions as a positive condition for the emergence of what is being depicted” (159-160). Secondly, in Borges’s evocation of its “vertiginosos espéctaculos” (“dizzying spectacles”; 129), the Aleph is also to a certain extent a missing object, the central point around which gravitates the seemingly centrifugal and ever drifting spectacle of the universe; in this case, however, unlike with Daneri, this central point is caught in the play of mirrors of Borges’s evocation; yet, its presence is merely a sort of transparent opening into a truly “vertiginous” infinite play of reflections: “vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en Aleph la tierra” (“saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph”;).

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63 Her first words about the Aleph are: “[a]ccording to Borges the ‘object’ of literature is in any case vertiginous and hallucinatory” (43)
It is at the level of the narrative of “El Aleph” that the concealed, underground Aleph is finally exposed as the “object” of the narrative. Many critics\(^{64}\) regard Borges’s fiction as having to do primarily with the limits of language; they often substantiate this claim with the famous passage preceding Borges’s evocation of the Aleph: “Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí mi desesperación de escritor” (624) (“I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer’s hopelessness begins”; 129). However, here again, although the story appears to be centered on the Aleph’s ineffable “spatial” revelation, it is, nonetheless and above all, a story about time, forgetfulness and death, to which language seems, in a way, especially attuned. In this respect, the incipit and the ending of the narrative are very revealing:

La candente mañana de febrero en que Beatriz Viterbo murió, después de una imperiosa agonía que no se rebajo un solo instante ni al sentimentalismo ni al miedo, note que las carteleras de fierro de la plaza de la Constitución habían renovado no sé qué aviso de cigarrillos rubios; el hecho me dolió, pues comprendí que el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella y que ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita. …

Existe ese Aleph en lo íntimo de una piedra? Lo he visto y lo he olvidado? Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz.

The same sweltering morning that Beatriz Viterbo died, after an imperious confrontation with her illness in which she had never for an instant stooped to either sentimentality or fear, I noticed that a new advertisement for some cigarettes or other (blondes, I believe they were) had been posted on the iron billboards of the Plaza Constitución; the fact deeply grieved me, for I realized that the vast unceasing universe was already growing away from her, and that this change was but the first in an infinite series... (118)

\(^{64}\) See SchlomyMualem’s summary in “What can be shown Cannot be Said: Wittgenstein's Doctrine of Showing and Borges’ 'the Aleph’” (50).
Does that aleph exist, within the heart of a stone? Did I see it when I saw all things, and then forget it? Our minds are permeable to forgetfulness; I myself am distorting and losing, through the tragic erosion of the years, the features of Beatriz. (133)

It is this elegiac tone that might explain Borges’s disillusion in the Aleph in that the Aleph reveals not only hidden “cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino” (626) ("obscene, incredible, detailed letters that Beatriz had sent Carlos Argentino"; 130), but also the decaying corpse of Beatriz – vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo” (626) (“saw the horrendous remains of what had once, deliciously, been Beatriz Viterbo”; 130). Daneri had lured him into the contemplation of the Aleph with the promise that “muy en breve podrás entablar un diálogo con todas las imágenes de Beatriz” (624) (within a very short while you will be able to begin a dialogue with all the images of Beatriz”; 128). All these images, like the portraits and photographs of Beatriz whose frozen and mute expressions still greet the visitor in Beatriz old house65 speak of death and of a time forever gone. Ultimate object of desire, promise of divine omniscience, the Aleph has to be renounced precisely because its promise also conceals the cold embrace of death, a suspension or freezing of life, buried alive in a dark basement in the agony of a moment that feels like a nightmarish eternity.

In fact, ultimate object of desire, the Aleph, to which no catalogue can render justice but silence, is also that lost object around which gravitates a blind compulsive drive to say that which cannot be said. In the narrative, we assist to:

65 “Beatriz Viterbo, de perfil, en colores; Beatriz, con antifaz, en los carnavales de 1921; la primera comunión de Beatriz; Beatriz, el día de su boda con Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz poco después del divorcio, en un almuerzo del Club Hípico; Beatriz, en Quilmes, con Delia San Marco Porcel y Carlos Argentino; Beatriz, con el pekinés que le regaló Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, de frente y de tres cuartos, sonriendo, la mano en el mentón” (617)
... la répétition inlassable d’une pulsion qui, propulsée par une perte initiale, n’arrête pas d’errer inassouvie, trompée, faussée, avant de trouver son seul objet stable, la mort. Manipuler cette répétition, la mettre en scène, l’exploiter jusqu’à ce que elle délivre, au-delà de son éternel retour, sa destiné sublime d’être une lutte avec la mort – n’est ce pas ce qui caractérise l’écriture ? … Est-ce cet Aleph, “objet” impossible, l’imaginaire impossible, qui soutient le travail de l’écriture, lui qui n’est pourtant qu’un arrêt provisoire dans la course borgésienne vers la mort contenue dans le gouffre de la cave maternelle ? (Kristeva 31-32)

... the untiring repetition of drive, which, propelled by an initial loss, does not cease wandering, unsated, deceived, warped, until it finds its only stable object – death. Handling this repetition, staging it, cultivating it until it releases, beyond its eternal return, its sublime destiny of being a struggle with death – is it not that which characterizes writing? … Does this Aleph, this impossible “object,” this impossible imagination, sustain the work of writing, even though the latter is merely a temporary halt in the Borgesian race towards death, which is contained in the chasm of the maternal cave? (43)

Daneri is the cautionary example of the one who clings too much to the lost object; he thinks the Aleph is his own and he is horrified by the perspective of the destruction of his house and the Aleph. On the contrary, Borges realizes that the Aleph is lost the moment he tries to evoke it; only its artificial re-creation is possible. As Elena del Río Parra and Julio Ortega remark, Borges’s strategy – emblematic of his poetics – is two folded: “Aun si esta estrategia proclama el carácter único, epifánico y fantástico a la vez, de la vision; sugiere también la necesidad del artificio” (17) (“Even if this strategy proclaims the at once unique, epiphanic and fantastic character of the vision, it also suggests the need for the artifice”; my translation). However, Borges is not satisfied neither by the total vision nor the artificial recreation of the Aleph through language. In the end, Borges renounces the Aleph in what amounts to a true Lacanian “traversing of the fantasy”: by finally accepting Beatriz’s death and the passing of time, Borges is also
accepting the loss of that primordial “object” to which he clung in denial just like he clung to the memory of Beatriz; in the dark recesses of the house, the Aleph evokes the unconscious and the libido, generators of dreams, indifferent to time and death. “El Aleph” stages that very Freudian conflict between the libido and its phantasms, and the reality principle, understood here as Ananké, necessity and death. The motif of the limitless sphere gains a new significance. The Aleph is, on the one hand, the hidden, unlimited reserve of libido which mirrors the infinity of our phantasmic universes, whether it is the universal library of Babel, literature or even science. The Aleph represents truly the ultimate phantasm of an unbounded curiosity; yet, this unquenchable curiosity is bound to look at its own blind spot, its own repressed origin and the pre-conditions of its unfolding. It is then that, on the other hand, the Aleph is suddenly seen in itself, as a diminutive sphere in a dark basement, a delimited, finite space, self-contained and constraining, metaphor for all of those closed “universes”, “language games” (Wittgenstein) like literature, absorbing pursuits whose autonomy opens a seemingly infinite playground. In contrast with the banal, petty, finiteness of existence, in these universes, one might feel like Hamlet, “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself King of infinite space” – Borges actually uses this quote from Hamlet as one of the two introductory epigraphs to the short story –. Yet, at the same time, “El Aleph” exposes these universes as being true “nutshells”, exiguous, isolated and alienated from the life that goes on out on the wide world.

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66 As has been already mentioned, it is not only in “El Aleph” that Borges uses this “emblem” of the limitless sphere. Yet, besides the inquisición – “La esfera de Pascal” – devoted to it, we find it also in the description of the universal library in “La biblioteca de Babel”: “La Biblioteca es una esfera cuyo centro cabal es cualquier hexágono, cuya circunferencia es inaccesible” (466). In his “Vindicación de ‘Bouvard et Pécuchet’”, science is defined as “una esfera finita que crece en el espacio infinito, cada nueva expansión le hace comprender una zona mayor de lo desconocido, pero lo desconocido es inagotable” (261) (“a finite sphere that grows in infinite space; each new expansion makes it include a larger zone of the unknown, but the unknown is inexhaustible”; Non Fictions 388.).
Conclusion

In “La Curiosité ou les espaces du savoir”, Nicole Chaquin evokes curiosity as an “[i]nvitation au voyage” (“invitation to travel”). Indeed, it was a similar curiosity that sparked this literary journey that is coming to a close, a curiosity about the complex relationship between literature and knowledge. My original aim was not to define and assess the epistemological status or the cognitive value of literary works; rather than in the status of the “knowledge” they were about or they represented, I was interested in “knowledge” as the “object” of a very particular, yet exclusivist, desire to know. More than ever, “knowledge”, whatever we consider it to be, has become the object of an intense desire in modernity. From the beginning, I was particularly interested in narratives that exposed the problematic nature of such an “object” of desire, emptied of any content by placing it at the confluence of concurring desires. The objects of my curiosity were narratives about that very desire of which they were the products as well. In other words, these narratives were all true vortexes of curiosities: that of the protagonists of the narratives as much as that of the authors themselves and that, no less important, of the curious readers like myself.

From Rabelais’s and Marlowe’s portrayals of a Renaissance curiosity to Italo Calvino’s Palomar, many were to be the ports of call of this literary exploration of curiosity: Enlightenment’s tales of curiosity like Johnson’s Rasselas and Voltaire’s Candide or an emblematic Modernist novel like Der Zauberberg. A dissertation about an all-reaching curiosity could only arise from a similarly excessive ambition. From the beginning, therefore, I felt that the works to be included in such an over-reaching project could in the end only appear as a random and arbitrary selection. The dissertation was to be beset by the same contradiction it purported to study. And yet, I was always surprised by the final selection that imposed itself
naturally: a series of narratives whose thematic was similar enough to seem unnecessarily repetitive and redundant. It was as if this study on curiosity was contaminated by the same compulsive element at work in these narratives. *Bouvard et Pécuchet, Die Blendung* and “El Aleph” are all narratives about the anachronistic, scholastic curiosity of solitary middle-aged men, all farcical caricatures of the phallogocentric subject of the Enlightenment. Their ambitious Faustian *curiositas*, true Will to Power whose “object” – be it Nature or texts – is always feminized, is ridiculed and is deflated into the thin air of which phantasm are made, into an inoffensive, farcical, display of impotence.

The decision to begin this exploration of curiosity with Flaubert instead of Rabelais was dictated by a constant need to narrow the focus of a topic that always threatened to get out of hand. The contrast between Rabelais and Flaubert was particularly striking. For a Humanist like Rabelais, doctor in Medicine and Law, his farcical roman had probably not a very different status from that of *Moriae Encomium* for Erasmus, a true curiosity, an entertaining – though certainly pedagogical – distraction from their serious humanist concerns. And yet, the modernity of Rabelais stems from a simultaneous acknowledgment that literature is a “serious” game with a “substantificque moelle” (“substantial marrow”). And then, we have Flaubert, whose farcical encyclopaedia, *Bouvard*, was serious enough to demand more than twenty years of research and efforts. Flaubert, who did not become a doctor like his father and was not able to pass the Bar exam, was in a good position to taste the alienation experienced by the modern literary writer within a cultural landscape marked by the growing prestige of science and “knowledge”. It is not surprising that Pierre Bourdieu regards Flaubert, together with Baudelaire, as the creator of the modern autonomous literary field. Yet, this autonomy is profoundly contradictory. The contradiction is encapsulated in Bersani’s formula to describe the end of *Bouvard*, when he speaks of a “liberating impotence”. This seems to be the inescapable alternative of literature in
modernity: its autonomy, a promise of absolute freedom or an isolating prison-house; a form of supreme freedom, redemptive site for an increasingly fragmented modernity, or just a mere inconsequential, entertaining curiosity. This radicalized alternative characterizes also literary studies and even the humanities as a whole – and by extension this dissertation – schizophrenically hesitating between a quasi megalomaniac conviction to be the only possible site capable of affording a comprehensive view of an increasingly fragmented modernity, and self-consciously aware of its own inconsequential superfluity, its marginal, residual position within culture.

For a dissertation that was meant to be about literature and knowledge, about curiosity, the final selection of works enacted instead literature’s withdrawal into an autonomous symbolic field. Epistemological concerns had been increasingly replaced by discursive ones in modernity. If curiosity is no longer about the world but about the word, the world had certainly not been evacuated altogether. The world and reality are no longer the object of curiosity, but its constitutive blind spot, its own denied foundation – its “object” in a Freudian sense; this “reality” is the repressed “object” of curiosity, which can only be brought to light by a curiosity about curiosity. This repressed reality that makes curiosity possible is none other than that skholè or liberation from the urgencies of the world, towards which these narratives are irreducibly ambivalent. On the one hand, Bourdieu’s “scholastic disposition” is exposed in its most caricatural form as the alienating “scholastic confinement” (Bourdieu, *Meditations* 5) of solitary men embarked in a quixotic quest; on the other hand, this gesture is recuperated by the writers themselves – and the readers – as ushering in an autonomous literary field. These two incompatible readings speak to the contradictory position of literature within the cultural field in modernity: both inside and partaking in the illusio, the stakes, pertaining to these autonomous
symbolic universes; but also outside and able to expose that same illusio as mere illusion divorced from the life-world.

Yet, this impossible “object” of curiosity should also be read as an instance of that Real that Lacan defines as an “impossibility”. Rather than an unjustified foray into questions of mimesis and literary representation, the Lacanian Real turned out to be central in my attempts to properly theorize curiosity, and, in particular, to come to terms with the fascinating constitutive ambivalence of curiosity understood as both the quality of a subject and the attribute of an object. For, the impossibility of the Real is both on the side of the subject and on the side of the object.

The ideal of absolute knowledge to which the intellectual curiosity of Bouvard, Pécuchet and Peter Kien hanker after cannot be embodied. The moment it seems to have been attained, it is reified, “objectified”: the disembodied, omniscient gaze from nowhere is exposed as an obscene, voyeuristic curiosity. After many delays and postponements to maintain it alive, Flaubert’s encyclopaedic curiosity coalesces into an inconsequential, farcical encyclopaedia, a true curiosity of a novel. “El aleph” is the perfect pendant to Flaubert’s last novel⁶⁷. The playful seriousness of Flaubert’s encyclopaedic project, which was to prove so exacting, contrasts with the serious playfulness of Borges’s short fiction. The Aleph is an image, a metaphor for that impossible subject/object of curiosity – first described as a “place”, the Aleph becomes an object once one occupies that place: the Aleph is that impossible “subjective” position which once occupied is exposed as a fetishist, “objectifying” gaze.

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⁶⁷ Borges had Flaubert’s Bouvard in such high esteem that he wrote a “Vindicación de Bouvard et Pécuchet” (“Defense of Bouvard et Pécuchet”).
This reading would seem to support a reading of these narratives of curiosity as modern satires of learning simply ridiculing the phallogocentric subject of the Enlightenment and his ambitions to attain a surveying, authoritative position. Depending on the critics, this would make them typically modernist works or clearly announcing post-modernism. Yet, what I have been trying to argue is that, in these narratives, this impossible position from which a disembodied, sovereign gaze looks on the world is exposed not only as a ridiculous phantasm, but also as being inescapable. This is very similar to Žižek’s Lacanian critique of metalanguage, in The Sublime Object of Ideology, as an impossible yet inescapable position, and, also similar to that “‘antinomy of critic-ideological reason’” which Žižek describes in “The Spectre of Ideology”: “ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality – the moment we yield to that temptation, we are back in ideology” (17). The Aleph is a perfect illustration that the moment the place affording omniscience is reached, it collapses into an object, for a fetishist gaze.

Bakhtin was therefore right when he considered that Bouvard was not a polyphonic novel because it “unites material of the most heterogeneous content, but this heterogeneity does not function in the structure of the novel itself … – because it is subordinated to the unity of a personal style and tone permeating it through and through, the unity of a single world and a single consciousness” (15). However, it is the nature of Flaubert’s monologism that has to be reassessed. For, in this story about two copyists seeking to become and somehow supplant the (narrator’s) Voice of science, this monologic position is exposed as a true empty place, impossible to attain but also inescapable.
But the impossibility of the Real is also on the side of the “object.” *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, *Die Blendung* and “El aleph” make for paradoxical “objects” of knowledge. On the one hand, they are certainly the product of the well documented curiosity of their authors. And in turn, to a certain extent, they can be regarded as almost naively down-to-earth, straightforwardly “realist”, telling an almost proverbial, age-old cautionary tale of curiosity, easily recuperated. Yet, the naivety of their mimetism is only comparable to the implacability of their anti-mimetism. For, on the other hand, rather than a product of curiosity, they appear as its monstrous, inassimilable by-product. The narratives themselves are the leftover of their protagonists’ greedy desire to incorporate everything and leave no residue. As stories of a compulsive drive, these narrative are truly a meaningless, “irrecuperable”, residue; moreover, in the narratives themselves we find metaphors for the residual nature of these “objects” of curiosity, which work also as organic metaphors for the works themselves, reduced to monstrous curiosities: Bouvard and Pécuchet’s farcical encyclopaedia of fossilized common-places, Peter Kien’s battered and petrified body eventually reduced to ashes, and the Aleph itself, obscene coalescence of materiality in a concealed cellar, are all the impossible “object” – in the sense of being both the product and the by-product – of an all devouring curiosity. Therefore, in line with what not only Žižek but also Fredrick Jameson and Christopher Prendergast have claimed<sup>68</sup>, these narratives lend themselves to two incompatible, antagonistic readings that bear witness to what Antoine Compagnon, in *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*, regards as the fundamental and irreducible aporetic character of modernity. Thanks to its paradoxical location within culture, both privileged and marginal, literature appears simultaneously as the site of all – ultimately phantasmic – “totalizing” visions, as well as its monstrous residue, obscene materialization of its unavowed corpo-reality.

<sup>68</sup> See note 16.
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