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Literature and Life

Gilles Deleuze

Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco

To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete, as Witold Gombrowicz said as well as practiced. Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived. Writing is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or -vegetable, becomes-molecule, to the point of becoming-imperceptible. These becomings may be linked to each other by a particular line, as in J. M. G. Le Clézio's novels; or they may coexist at every level, following the doorways, thresholds, and zones that make up the entire universe, as in H. P. Lovecraft's powerful oeuvre. Becoming does not move in the other direction, and one does not become Man, insofar as man presents himself as a dominant form of expression that claims to impose itself on all matter, whereas woman, animal, or molecule always has a component of flight that escapes its own formalization. The shame of being a man—is there any better reason to write? Even when it is a woman who is becoming, she has to become-woman, and this becoming has nothing to do with a state she could claim as her own. To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or undifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from *a*

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woman, *an* animal, or *a* molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and non-preexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form. One can institute a zone of proximity with anything, on the condition that one creates the literary means for doing so. André Dhôtel, for instance, makes use of the aster: something passes between the sexes, the genera, or the kingdoms.¹ Becoming is always “between” or “among”: a woman between women, or an animal among others. But the power of the indefinite article is effected only if the term in becoming is stripped of the formal characteristics that make it say *the* (“the animal in front of you . . .”). When Le Clézio becomes-Indian, it is always as an incomplete Indian who does not know “how to cultivate corn, or carve a dugout canoe”; rather than acquiring formal characteristics, he enters a zone of proximity.² It is the same, in Kafka, with the swimming champion who does not know how to swim. All writing involves an athleticism, but far from reconciling literature with sports or turning writing into an Olympic event, this athleticism is exercised in flight and in the breakdown of the organic body—an athlete in bed, as Henri Michaux put it. One becomes animal all the more when the animal dies; and contrary to the spiritualist prejudice, it is the animal who knows how to die, who has a sense or premonition of death. Literature begins with a porcupine’s death according to Lawrence or with the death of a mole in Kafka: “our poor little red feet outstretched for tender sympathy.”³ As Karl-Philipp Moritz (1756–1793) said, one writes for dying calves.⁴ Language must devote itself to reaching these feminine, animal, molecular

1. See André Dhôtel, *Terres de mémoire* (Paris, 1979), p. 225 on a becoming-aster in his *La Chronique fabuleuse* (Paris, 1960).

2. J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Hai* (Paris, 1971), p. 5. In his first novel, *Le Procès-verbal*, Le Clézio presents in an almost exemplary fashion a character taken up in a becoming-woman, then a becoming-rat, then a becoming-imperceptible, in which he effaces himself. See Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal* (Paris, 1963); trans. Daphne Woodward, under the title *The Interrogation* (New York, 1964).

3. Franz Kafka, quoted in Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York, 1974), p. 90.—TRANS.

4. See Karl-Philipp Moritz, “Anton Reiser,” in *La Légende dispersée: Anthologie du romantisme allemand*, ed. Jean-Christophe Bailly (Paris, 1976), p. 38.

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detours, and every detour is a becoming mortal. There are no straight lines, neither in things nor in language. Syntax is the set of necessary detours that are created in each case to reveal the life in things.

To write is not to recount one's memories and voyages, one's loves and griefs, one's dreams and phantasms. It is the same thing to sin through an excess of reality as through an excess of the imagination. In both cases it is the eternal daddy-mommy, an Oedipal structure that is projected onto the real or introjected into the imaginary. In this infantile conception of literature, what we seek at the end of the voyage, or at the heart of a dream, is a father. One writes for one's father-mother. Marthe Robert has pushed this infantilization or "psychoanalyzation" of literature to an extreme, leaving the novelist no other choice than that of the Bastard or the Foundling.⁵ Even becoming-animal is not safe from an Oedipal reduction of the type "my cat, my dog." As Lawrence says, "if I am a giraffe, and the ordinary Englishmen who write about me . . . are nice, well-behaved dogs, there it is, the animals are different. . . . The animal I am you instinctively dislike."⁶ As a general rule, fantasies simply treat the indefinite as a mask for a personal or a possessive: "a child is being beaten" is quickly transformed into "my father beat me." But literature takes the opposite path and exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal—which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point: a man, a woman, a beast, a stomach, a child. . . . It is not the first two persons that function as the condition for literary enunciation; literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say "I" (Blanchot's "neuter").⁷ Of course, literary characters are perfectly individuated and are neither vague nor general, but all their individual traits elevate them to a vision that carries them off in an indefinite, like a becoming that is too powerful for them: Ahab and the vision of Moby Dick. The Miser is not a type, but on the contrary his individual traits (to love a young woman, and so on) make him accede to a vision: he *sees* gold in such a way that he is sent racing along a witch's line where he gains the power of the indefinite—a miser . . . , *some* gold, more gold. . . . There is no literature without fabulation, but, as Henri Bergson was able to see, fabulation—the fabulating function—does not consist in imagining or projecting an ego. Rather, it

5. See Marthe Robert, *Roman des origines et origines du roman* (Paris, 1972); trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, under the title *Origins of the Novel* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980).

6. D. H. Lawrence, letter to John Middleton Murry, 20 May 1929, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Keith Sagar and James T. Boulton, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 1993), 7:294.

7. See Maurice Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris, 1949), pp. 29–30; trans. Charlotte Mandell, under the title *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, Calif., 1995), pp. 21–22. "Something happens to [the characters] that they can only recapture by relinquishing their power to say 'I'" (Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* [1963; Paris, 1992], pp. 563–64; trans. Susan Hanson, under the title *The Infinite Conversation* [Minneapolis, 1993], pp. 384–85). Literature here seems to refute the linguistic conception, which finds in shifters, and notably in the two first persons, the very condition of enunciation.

attains these visions, it raises itself to these becomings and powers.

One does not write with one's neuroses. Neuroses or psychoses are not passages of life but states into which we fall when the process is interrupted, blocked, or plugged up. Illness is not a process but a stopping of the process, as in the "Nietzsche case." Moreover, the writer as such is not a patient but rather a physician, the physician of himself and of the world. The world is the set of symptoms whose illness merges with man. Literature then appears as an enterprise of health; not that the writer would necessarily be in good health (there would be the same ambiguity here as with athleticism), but he possesses irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him while nonetheless giving him the becomings that dominant and substantial health would render impossible.⁸ The writer returns from what he has seen and heard with red eyes and pierced eardrums. What health would be sufficient to liberate life wherever it is imprisoned by and within man, by and within organisms and genera? It is like Spinoza's delicate health, while it lasted, bearing witness until the end to a new vision whose passage it remains open to.

Health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people that is missing. It is the task of the fabulating function to invent a people. We do not write with memories, unless it is to make them the origin and collective destination of a people to come still ensconced in its betrayals and repudiations. American literature has an exceptional power to produce writers who can recount their own memories, but as those of a universal people composed of immigrants from all countries. Thomas Wolfe "inscribes all of America in writing insofar as it can be found in the experience of a single man."⁹ This is not exactly a people called upon to dominate the world. It is a minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary. Perhaps it only exists in the atoms of the writer, a bastard people, inferior, dominated, always in becoming, always incomplete. *Bastard* no longer designates a familial state, but the process or drift of the races. I am a beast, a Negro of an inferior race for all eternity. This is the *becoming* of the writer. Kafka (for central Europe) and Melville (for America) present literature as the collective enunciation of a minor people, or of all minor peoples, who find their expression only in and through the writer.¹⁰ Though it always refers to singular agents [*agents*],

8. On literature as an affair of health, but for those who do not have it or have only fragile health, see Henri Michaux, postface to "Mes propriétés," *La Nuit remue* (Paris, 1972), pp. 191–95. And Le Clézio writes, "One day, we will perhaps know that there wasn't any art, but only *medicine*" (Le Clézio, *Hai*, p. 7).

9. André Bay, preface to Thomas Wolfe, *De la mort au matin*, trans. pub. (Paris, 1987), p. 12.

10. See Kafka's reflections on so-called minor literatures in his diary entry for 25 Dec. 1911, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, trans. Joseph Kresh, ed. Max Brod, 2 vols. (New York,

literature is a collective assemblage [*agencement*] of enunciation. Literature is delirium, but delirium is not a father-mother affair; there is no delirium that does not pass through peoples, races, and tribes and that does not haunt universal history. All delirium is world historical, “a displacement of races and continents.”¹¹ Literature is delirium, and as such its destiny is played out between the two poles of delirium. Delirium is a disease, the disease par excellence, whenever it erects a race it claims is pure and dominant. But it is the measure of health when it invokes this oppressed bastard race that ceaselessly stirs beneath dominations, resisting everything that crushes and imprisons, a race that is outlined in relief in literature as process. Here again, there is always the risk that a diseased state will interrupt the process or becoming; health and athleticism both confront the same ambiguity, the constant risk that a delirium of domination will be mixed with a bastard delirium, pushing literature toward a larval fascism, the disease against which it fights—even if this means diagnosing the fascism within itself and fighting against itself. The ultimate aim of literature is to release this creation of a health or this invention of a people—that is, a possibility of life—in the delirium. To write for this people that is missing . . . (*for* means less “in the place of” than “for the benefit of”).

We can see more clearly the effect of literature on language: as Proust says, it opens up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois but a becoming-other of language, a “minorization” of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch’s line that escapes the dominant system. Kafka makes the swimming champion say, I speak the same language as you, and yet I don’t understand a single word you’re saying. Syntactic creation or style—this is the becoming of language. The creation of words or neologisms is worth nothing apart from the effects of syntax in which they are developed. So literature already presents two aspects: through the creation of syntax, it not only brings about a decomposition or destruction of the maternal language but also the invention of a new language within language. “The only way to defend language is to attack it.” “Every writer is obliged to create his or her own language.”¹² Language seems to be seized by a delirium, which forces it out of its usual furrows. As for the third aspect, it stems from the fact that a foreign language

1948), 1:191–98, and those of Herman Melville on American literature in his “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in *Herman Melville*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York, 1962), pp. 37–55, esp. pp. 45–49.

11. Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell,” *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Wallace Fowle (Chicago, 1966), p. 193.—TRANS.

12. Marcel Proust, letter to Madame Émile Straus, Jan. 1908, *Lettres à Madame et Monsieur Émile Straus*, vol. 6 of *Correspondance générale de Marcel Proust*, ed. Suzy Proust-Mante and Paul Brach (Paris, 1936), p. 93. “There are no certainties, even grammatical ones” (p. 94).—TRANS.

cannot be hollowed out in one language without language as a whole in turn being toppled or pushed to a limit, to an outside or reverse side that consists of Visions and Auditions that no longer belong to any language. These visions are not fantasies, but veritable Ideas that the writer sees and hears in the interstices of language, in its intervals. They are not interruptions of the process but breaks that form part of it, like an eternity that can only be revealed in a becoming, or a landscape that only appears in movement. They are not outside language, but the outside of language. The writer as seer and hearer, the aim of literature: it is the passage of life within language that constitutes Ideas.

These three aspects, which are in perpetual movement, can be seen clearly in Antonin Artaud: the fall of letters in the decomposition of the maternal language (*R, T, . . .*); their incorporation into a new syntax or in new names with a syntactic import, creators of a language (“eTReTé”); and, finally, breath words, the asyntactical limit toward which all language tends.¹³ And even in Céline—we cannot avoid saying it, so acutely do we feel it: *Journey to the End of the Night*, or the decomposition of the maternal language; *Death on the Installment Plan*, with its new syntax as a language within language; and *Guignol’s Band*, with its suspended exclamations as the limit of language, as explosive visions and sonorities. In order to write, it may perhaps be necessary for the maternal language to be odious, but only so that a syntactic creation can open up a kind of foreign language in it, and language as a whole can reveal its outside, beyond all syntax. We sometimes congratulate writers, but they know that they are far from having achieved their becoming, far from having attained the limit they set for themselves, which ceaselessly slips away from them. To write is also to become something other than a writer. To those who ask what literature is, Virginia Woolf responds, To whom are you speaking of writing? The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with something else.

If we consider these criteria, we can see that, among all those who make books with a literary intent, even among the mad, there are very few who can call themselves writers.

13. For Deleuze’s analysis of Artaud’s treatment of language, see his “Of the Schizophrenic and the Little Girl,” *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York, 1990), pp. 82–93.—TRANS.