

Introduction

Practices of Language and Experience of Violence



I. Education

The storm rages between the kitchen walls. The child, accustomed to it, crossed the hall upon returning from school, climbed the stairs in silence, and locked himself in his room, which lets onto the courtyard shaded by the chestnut tree. He knows that the lightning-sharp phrases, thunderous reproaches, and hurtful recriminations will join him before long. He knows all about the flaring tempers, the mood swings, the unjustified anger that give language the strange power of becoming a weapon of intimate destruction. He is used to the cries, the outbursts, the irrevocable judgments, the definitive verdicts that transform affection into a tribunal and break what little confidence he might have kept in his ability to divert the furious lightning with everyday words. He has experienced it many times: everything that he might say in his defense is capable of being turned against him; there is no argument that holds when a loving word from which he would expect help and protection blows, on the contrary, a tempestuous wind. At that moment, his own words—hardly heard, hardly understood, immediately contradicted—are swept up like so many strands of straw, as if they did not deserve the attention for which all attachment calls. So far, he knows it only intuitively, but he will learn it endlessly: every affective relation is haunted by the possibility of sudden breaks, of brutal interruptions and reversals that lodge violence in the heart of the relation we maintain with language from our first steps in life, weakening all the relations that compose the fabric of existence.

But he also experiences it on school benches. All mastery, the mastery of language first of all, is indissociable from the constraints and sanctions imposed by exercises meant to assure that mastery and to control it. Year after year, it accumulates and retains the traces of these constraints and sanctions. This is the price of all the sentences, the phrasings, the ways of speaking and thinking, the expressive capacities he is made

to appropriate: they are imposed upon him, mold him, only through the discipline that education demands, the discussion that it bridles, the commentary that it interrupts. As days go by, the child becomes the person he is required to be only by suspending, from morning to evening, any protest against the rules, by forbidding any untimely initiative, any invention, any fugitive word and, later on, any fugitive writing seeking to free itself. Over the course of interminable days, he learns how to keep quiet as much as how to speak, how to mimic attention, concentration, and interest even when everything in these repetitive operations cultivates distraction and evasion. Such is the law of all instruction, education, and training. It imprisons anyone that bends to its rules at the same time as it liberates them. Every morning, the child sets out on the road to elementary school, to junior high school, and then to high school. He descends the staircase, mounts his bicycle, and crosses the railroad tracks fully aware that, when he encounters a difficulty, the pacifying virtues of the word that teaches, the joy that results from it, the consolation, its calming effect, the encouragements that he would love to gather from his teachers' mouths, are never guaranteed to overcome their impatience, weariness, and irritation. If he leaves home with a sense of serenity, it is not out of the ordinary for him to return at night with a heavy heart, discouraged, because he remains so apprehensive, at his desk, of the words that punish his hesitations, his forgetfulness, or faults; he dreads the words that order him to be quiet, that cover him with shame, and the grades and evaluations that fall like guillotine blades when he does not meet the expectations imposed upon him. He is well aware that his teachers and family will accept no excuses then; he knows that his protests and denials, if not ruses, his declarations of intent, everything *singular* that he could say, everything important to him, will carry hardly any weight before the imperative and communal law that demands submission, discipline, and results—as if it were impossible for our experience of language to avoid being caught in the trap of evaluation and competitive performances from the beginning.

II. Inheritances

Violence thus essentially belongs to this experience, to the most familiar uses of language, and to the way we learn it. No one knows, however, the makeup of their first impression, what untimely cries and what melodious songs, what moments of tenderness and what sudden bursts of brutality left the first traces. Everyone has a singular way of using language, without knowing how it was inherited, without knowing the

circumstances under which, in other words, one developed the timidity or volubility, the particular intonations, the rhythm, the slow or staccato delivery, the syntactic turns, and the idiomatic expressions that distinguish one in the eyes of others and give a unique timbre to one's voice. Each time we speak, we thus have only a partial and illusory mastery of what leaves our mouths. While we imagine that we alone are responsible for the sentences that we address to others, we depend upon more than one inheritance, and we bend to *more than one law* that we did not choose. Family and its system of education, school and its rites of passage, the social milieu and its linguistic codes (not to mention neighborhoods, towns, and regions) are so many factors that compromise and upset the comfortable idea of our own sovereignty, as if nothing and no one—none of these familial, educational, or social forces—played a part in what we believe we say and think on our own. The paradox, then, is the following: in a sense, nothing singularizes us more than our relation to language; at the same time, nothing testifies more to the risk that we constantly run of being *locked in* a language that is not ours. We must thus admit the resulting dependence as another form of “violence” inscribed at the heart of our relation to language. If the first manifestation of violence, understood as recrimination, blame, and judgment, was identified as the exterior but nevertheless familiar threat of the security of familial or educational circles—guaranteed, they say, by a mother tongue—turning into insecurity, the second manifestation, understood as the language of others inhabiting, invading, and haunting our own, possesses everyone from within. In the first case, we are assaulted by a language characterized, suddenly and unpredictably, by its power to destroy the confidence we need. In the second, we are exposed to a veritable “identity crisis.” Who are we, whatever our certainty of our own existence, if there is nothing in our way of speaking that has not in one way or another been imposed, if everything that we are capable of saying does not really belong to us, if we are never the person that we believe ourselves to be, if we are deceived or betrayed by the language, more foreign than we imagined, that accompanies our thoughts?

III. Discriminations

But the violence does not end there. It is linked to our experience of language in a third and still more radical fashion. We have at least the diffuse impression or feeling that this third violence takes place upon every compromise concerning the possibility, not of communicating in general, but rather of addressing a word to the other *as such*, a word concerned

with what constitutes his or her singularity, convinced that he or she cannot be confused with anyone else and that no judgment, no label, no category exhausts what makes up his or her uniqueness. This violence, more explicitly, names this compromise itself whenever ideological, political, or religious apparatuses erase the possibility of seeing in whoever or whatever stands before us a being to whom such a word is due. Its most common and recurrent manifestations are racism and anti-Semitism, but it is also every undue characterization that reduces the other to *his or her* social class, to *his or her* religious group, or to any other form of affiliation or collective or communal identity, as if the victim's very individuality were thus contained, constricted, and denied in advance. In such circumstances, words no longer designate or, when necessary, address a singular individual; they designate the category with which he or she is supposed to identify—"Jew," "Arab," "petit-bourgeois," "kulak," "black"—and are taken as an explanation and guarantee of everything that could be said to or about him or her.

In the schoolyard, an argument breaks out and escalates. When arguments run out, the students turn with an illusory spontaneity to the insults learned from those older than them, unaware of the violent past crystalizing in their mouths, all during a time for recreation. As he grows older, becoming more familiar with the darkest pages of twentieth-century history, the memory of deportations and all the plans for extermination that have bloodied it, at what point does the child discover that these judgments—which turn language into both a weapon of collective stigmatization and a verbal assault, into a singular wound and a justification for murder—belong to the world in which he lives? What injustice must one commit, suffer, or witness, what survival stories must one hear in order to become indelibly aware of it? What book or photo album must one have opened, what lesson learned, what film seen in order to become conscious once and for all of the mortifying power contained in every act of denominating and characterizing of this order? One thing is certain: one day the adolescent, freed from all tutelage, had to start distinguishing between, on the one hand, those among his contemporaries who will never find anything wrong with such judgments and will mechanically reproduce such prejudices their whole lives and, on the other hand, those for whom such judgments will always be unbearable, causing indignation, calling for protest, nourishing rebellion.

From the perspective of language, finally, life is made up of the orientation and the choices that, from the days of our first relations in the halls of elementary school, junior high, and high school, distinguish those for whom exchanging words is a token of confidence. Friendship exercises a power of discernment that is inseparable from a heightened attention to

the “language of others,” language to which the heart becomes sensitive. Children and adolescents learn very early that there are certain words, ways of speaking, judging, deciding, affirming, and dominating, ways of using language with absolute certainty that, because they are synonymous with violence, make friendship impossible. He knows from then on that there is no exchange between friends that does not secretly rest on the promise that things will be otherwise for them, the promise, in other words, that language will escape this instrumentalization that dupes everyone seduced by it with the same violence. But he also knows that this promise is difficult, if not impossible, to keep; it threatens to reverse into its opposite at every moment. One day, in the course of a friendly dinner, another truth of what they share becomes as clear as day. And if what revealed itself were nothing but a masked competition to get the upper hand on the other without acknowledging it! Does every use of language turn out to be a theatrical power play? And if it is impossible to escape this suspicion, is it still not best to keep quiet?

IV. Political Awakening

But it is above all political consciousness that takes shape in proportion to its attention to the instances of violence that language facilitates and to the multiple forces—families, political parties, small groups, organizations, and other forms of community—that manipulate language to bring about exclusion while winning others over. Political consciousness shows itself to be all the more vigilant insofar as it knows how to resist the ease and escalations of the discriminating characterizations emphasized a moment ago, as well as the destructive magic of names that simplify the world by locking it into a conveniently legible grid (the diversity of peoples, classes, races, religions, and civilizations crudely identified and characterized, constructed as a password for understanding, deciding, and acting). The years go by, indeed, bruised at the turn of the century by ethnic cleansings in the Balkans, the Rwandan genocide, bloody fratricides in the Near East, the unsettling resurgence of European nationalisms and fundamentalisms of every kind, the “War on Terror,” all of which must be understood as testimonies to the fact that the murderous invocation of the name of the other still remains the horizon of our time. No system on its own, moreover, seems ready to renounce the convenient inscription of “reasons” for violence in the heart of political rhetoric, not even the democracies that are most capable, on the basis of their founding principles, of protecting themselves against it. The most solid institutions, treaties, international agreements and

pacts, declarations, communal rules and principles henceforth appear to be fragile seawalls, and one wonders how long they will resist the tumultuous tide of deafening declarations, vindictive speeches, and heinous programs that make this spiteful invocation the foremost element in their seduction. Because political awakening is indissociable from becoming conscious of all the manipulations authorized by language, beginning with the most murderous, from lies to threats, nothing could replace the need to perceive the violence brought on by these manipulations. The rules of our sensibility (the very ones that govern our relation to the suffering and misfortune in the world) and, with them, the principles of our opposition and resistance to injustice and oppression are forged in this perception. It thus traces, in consciousness, the uncrossable red line of refusal. Yet, because the denunciation of ruses and deceit is never simple, because it can itself become an excuse and justification for other forms of violence, our political judgments threaten, at every moment, to get caught in the endless downward spiral of the murderous consents that frame history. If it turns out that they are put to use for crime, the most solicitous words—justice, freedom, equality—therefore run the risk of losing all their credit.

V. Preoccupation

A word addressed to the other that grants rights to the irreplaceable, unsubstutable singularity of the one to whom it is addressed! If it is true that this address is never more compromised than when one gets carried away with denominating, with generalized identifications and characterizations that deny singularity by reducing the other to his or her affiliations, the violence of the negation is not limited to extreme cases. Indeed, in its most radical and most brutal form, this violence is a product of the effacement or eclipse of a dimension of language that the latter's daily uses or quotidian practices cause us to forget or, at least, prevent us from dwelling on: the "ethical" responsibility engaged in every situation that involves speaking and listening. Above all, the analysis of its failures or shortcomings, its pitfalls or deviations, proves that language use implies an ethical engagement of this order and, in this respect, constitutes the ethical element in every *encounter*, the ethical element that the encounter distributes at the same time that the ethical element makes the encounter possible. Two friends that have not seen each other for a long time rejoice upon meeting again for a long walk along the quays of the Seine; they have so much to tell each other, so much news to catch up on, and so many thoughts to share. But the hours

pass, and something entirely different occurs. A strange unease takes hold of them both; disappointment overrides the joy of meeting again. Each one ends up leaving with the confused feeling of not having been heard and also, perhaps, of having been unable to listen—of having let himself be distracted, carried off, transported by his own sentences or by those of the other to another time (yesterday, tomorrow, the day after) and to another place (other bodies, other faces, and other landscapes) a thousand leagues away from the friend.

This distance, this division, these absences are yet another form of violence. It erupts every time the “benevolent” attention of the speaker and, reciprocally, that of the listener—the necessary conditions for every “encounter”—eclipse each other for the sake of a relation of an entirely different order. Several modalities of darkness result. Let us distinguish two of them. The first is *preoccupation*, understood as *distraction*. Night has fallen; the family gathers round the dinner table in the large dining room, whose plate-glass windows lead onto a shadowy balcony. As he often does, the child asks a question. He asks about the Watergate scandal, which he has been hearing about on the radio and which fills so much of the news on television, an issue that his aunts and uncles, in turn, take up in their conversations. He thinks he is old enough to understand, but he receives no answer. He insists, but they ask him to be quiet; he is bothering the adults and must learn to stay out of their conversations. The next time, they consent and say a few words to him, but they do so distractedly, without paying any more attention to him. It is not certain, moreover, that those seated around the table are any more concerned with each other. Everyone seems to play their role, blocked by their own selves and preoccupied with the impression that they produce on the rest of the family. If the child is brushed aside, as he quickly comes to understand, it is because he has no place in these language games and because he does not count, at least not yet, in the preoccupation that plays out between rival adults.

VI. Love and Friendship

This preoccupation makes language use a social game, a rehearsed distraction that withdraws words from the responsibility of addressing. However relative it might be, its “violence” is thus a product of the fact that everyone’s words and sentences seem besieged by a whole theater of ulterior motives, of calculations and interests that always come down to the same: the barely masked staging of an ego essentially preoccupied with itself. In the end, nothing of any importance is said; the very

distinction between truth and falsity is secondary because all that counts is the appearance that the word validates and the mirror effect to which it leads: the illusion of sovereignty. Does that mean, inversely, that every true, friendly, or amorous encounter must presuppose something like a breakout or an unblocking, a suspension, an effacement or a retreat of the ego far away from the bustle that restricts it to itself? Is this what we must hope for, if not demand, from every relation, at the risk of flying too close to the sun? Put back in his place, the child does not yet know, no more than the adolescent who is revolted by this theatricality, how often existence will offer him proof: such preoccupation is ordinary and undoubtedly inevitable; however, as long as nothing contradicts it, as long as nothing prevents the ego from finding in language the means to relate everything back to itself, it is also destructive. Because this preoccupation suspends attention, listening, and, with them, that which in an address testifies to a responsibility, it effectively leads every relation to disaster.

If it is true, indeed, that each of these (attention, listening, and responsibility) is present in the promise of what it awaits from language's help, namely, continuous maintenance of the attachment called love or friendship, the invading preoccupation, as we have described it, compromises the trust necessitated by this promise. This happens every time two beings that love each other have the feeling that no words they could exchange—the very words that were once at the heart of so many intimate rites, in the secret of collusion—will lead anywhere now and that, consequently, they have nothing more to say to each other. Then comes preoccupation's reverse: the renunciation produced by disappointment and waning desire. One no longer expects or hopes for anything from the other, who is in any case elsewhere, no longer in the world formerly shared, a stranger to its landmarks. In these final death throes, speech becomes empty, and it is no better than silence. The contract (of speaking) that linked (tacitly) two beings to each other is broken. These words, ruminated and brooded over in the void, pave the way for separations.

This risk is not proper to the amorous word or to the affective relations that link us emotionally to others, more or less close to us. Indeed, one must take this ordinary collapse, from distancing to rupture, as a more general symptom. It is the sign and the effect of a vulnerability inscribed in the heart of our relation to language, and it reminds us that, in the end, every word is perhaps in this sense a "search for friendship." Every time we speak, we depend upon listening and answering, upon signs of attention, upon the care and concern that are implicitly

promised and that, consequently, threaten never to come. Every word is thus haunted not only by the risk of being misheard or misunderstood but also by the risk of no longer knowing how and no longer being able to address the person to whom the word is addressed. Whence the fragility that lodges the possibility of violence in the heart of our most ordinary and most common experience of language: it is intrinsically linked to a thousand and one detours taken by the *destruction*, whether by my own hand or another's—of the relations that it maintains and promises, that is, the rupture of the link that holds together the past, the present, and the future in shares [*partage*] of language.

VII. Aggression

Earlier, we recalled that there exist at least two ways for the ethical responsibility engaged by speech to be eclipsed. If the first is its effacement before the bustle that monopolizes the ego in search of self-affirmation, the second is the address that turns into aggression. When attempting to discern, as we are doing here, the link that associates, over the course of life, our experience of language with the test of violence as an inevitable dimension of its apportioning [*partage*] rather than something secondary or accidental, one first thinks of this second violence. Indeed, what is violence, the analysis of which constitutes the pivot of these reflections, if not first and foremost the experience of an aggression? What do being brutally reprimanded, belittled by a humiliating command, or insulted by an abusive word have in common if not the feeling of having one's psychical and physical integrity attacked and scathed by a rerouted use of language? Now, whether sudden or expected, this attack always produces the same thing: the rupture of the minimum trust required for sharing space and time to remain possible. This is the essence of lingual violence: it compromises the possibility of such belief. When nothing can prevent words from wounding or propositions from becoming murderous, speech unchained and freed of all ethical responsibility has no objective other than losing itself in the impossibility of this trust and, by that very fact, rendering illusory every promise of an address that grants rights to the singularity of the person to whom it is addressed—what I am here calling an *encounter*. Thus, for the violence inscribed at the heart of our experience of language to be, if not surpassed, at least *contradicted*, we *need to believe* that speech is not simply an instrument of exploitation and domination, that it brings peace and not war, that everything cannot be reduced to a fierce competition between egos, that the irreplaceable, unsubstitutable, and imperative

singularity of the one to whom speech is addressed matters in and for itself and is, in itself, something other than a mere means at the mercy of whoever manipulates it with his or her own words.

VIII. The Shoah

A December afternoon. The adolescent rides his bicycle to the small, blooming city that serves as the sub-prefecture a few miles from his town. In the light of the municipal library, he finds the first book, full of illustrations, of a long series that he will read on the expansion of Nazism, the contagion of its ideology, the power of its murderous slogans, the conversion of entire populations to its racial politics, and the deportation and the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War. Upon returning to his room, he cannot tear his eyes away from the book for hours on end. He intuitively discovers, without having the words to say it, that the link between language and violence not only concerns isolated individuals; it changes the direction of history. He imagines the deadly slogans and the calls for murder spewed across storefronts, the crowds captivated by an inflammatory rhetoric whose only goal will have been the encouragement of hating others and the justification of their elimination. The malefic power of words is without limits once it can legitimate the worst. But who can date *his or her* consciousness of radical evil exactly without ceding to illusory reconstructions? Who can name the moment when the most murderous pages of history left their trace on a sensibility that they will never release?

These are not just any pages, not just any events. Indeed, the radical evil exemplified by the plans and methods of the extermination practices implemented by the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century signify both the complete subjugation of language in support of unchained forces of destruction and language's absolute collapse. On the one hand, the *sedimentation of the worst* contaminated entire societies in their most ordinary language practices; on the other hand, nothing of those societies' linguistic and cultural capital—the very capital that was identified, with a complacency assured of its right to dominate the world, with civilization itself—could oppose this contamination. The extraordinary character of the lie and the terror, which took shape as murders to which those same societies consented, became ordinary, usual, common; no force was able to oppose it. This is the most difficult paradox to accept: the abyssal *imbalance* between *language that destroys*, with an infinite power to seduce, and *language that saves*, between ideology's disastrous power, as well as all the forms of violence inscribed in our relation to

language, and the weakness, if not the impotence, of any word still meant to oppose it.

Yet, can we simply give up our belief in the possibility of that other relation to language, however weak: a counterword that brings meaning back to its promises? Must one mourn the concepts of “justice,” “freedom,” “equality,” and even “truth,” resigning oneself to life under a variable but permanent regime of lies and terror, like those that fill the world in different ways? Supposing this to be case, our only way out would be consenting to this violence; we would have to remain suspicious of every word that we address to others as much as those that are addressed to us, suspecting that behind every word lies a self-affirmation, a will to domination, a calculation of self-interest, a more or less disguised aggression taken to be the only “truth” of language.

If we attempt to summarize the preceding pages, it appears that violence infects our relation to language in more than one way. First, from the perspective of education, violence is inseparable from our childhood experiences of language in the family circle, as Kafka’s *Diaries* recall so well, and in the context of educational institutions and their restrictive programs. Next, between silence, cries and whispers, violence constitutes one of the most visible signs of what threatens every relation: the absolute loss of all trust in what those sharing it—husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters—might have left to say to each other, as so many of Ingmar Bergman’s films teach us (if we did not already know). Further, the responsibility that links us in speech also strays toward insults and abuses, effacing the singularity of the one that the words address. Finally, and above all, the violence of language culminates in its ideological instrumentalization for murderous propaganda. It is then a question of words collectively stuck in one’s head like a chorus. These ideological choruses sediment the worst in the hearts and minds of the addressees, who end up seeing no obstacle for and no objection to the bloodthirsty logic that they implement. Victor Klemperer reminds us of this better than anyone else in his philological testimony, *Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii*, which emphasizes the extent to which the Nazi’s subjugation of language came down to impregnating “words and syntactical structures” with the “poison” of their ideology (16).

IX. Books

The child took refuge in his room, among books that he has already begun to collect, to accumulate, and with which he builds a rampart

against the wave of words, formulations, assertions, and denials that assail him—most often without those who make such formulations even realizing it. This is most likely the origin of his passion for bookstores, second-hand bookshops, displays of random books at second-hand markets and other improbable trading centers, like the one that takes place at the gates of Paris every weekend under the large windows of old abattoirs, an irresistible attraction to printed piles that will make him cross entire neighborhoods of Jerusalem and Tokyo with bright eyes, even when he does not understand the language (Hebrew and Japanese) in which the worn books, presented and abandoned to displays, are printed. He has always known that these places consecrated to books are vectors of freedom everywhere in the world, no matter the political, “ethnic,” or religious affiliation of those that venture there. And the collusion that the passion for books creates in all circumstances remains a bridge that reconnects languages and cultures and that overcomes all differences; it is the possibility of a line of resistance—as was, in the 1930s, the whisper of a poem that got Osip Mandelstam deported, vanishing in the plains of Kolyma. The most authoritarian powers have no illusions when they take on the task of keeping books under their control and fear more than anything else the diffusion and circulation of books that they have not authorized. But it is in vain because, whatever they do, whatever constraining measures and restrictions they impose, whatever persecutions they organize, the air that we breathe next to books freely chosen is always less oppressive, freed of those constraints that the child, discovering them, does not yet know how to name.

Yet, even there, retrospectively, this enigma seizes him belatedly through the absence of an answer. How is all of this decided? From where does this passion come, a passion that is first a continuous invasion of time and space? Year after year, the walls of his office, of his bedroom, of his dining and living rooms are covered with books; volumes pile up so high under his desk that it has become impossible for him to slide his feet under it. For decades, there has not been a single day or night, neither in his private space nor in hotels or guest rooms, without books lying close to him on the nightstand like an indispensable crutch. For a long time, one of his principal preoccupations before every departure has been deciding which of these invasive paper companions will be chosen for the trip. He is well aware, despite everything, of the place occupied and the alternative offered by these novels, books of poetry, and plays that he brings back from expeditions to bookstores and used-book markets with the feeling that he holds the most precious treasure in his hands: neither a withdrawal into himself nor a flight from the world into a hypothetical refuge. A fortress,

perhaps, but above all the whole chance or promise of a reconciliation with language's words—an other address, an other sharing out [*partage*], an other breath.

X. Literature and Philosophy

Literature and philosophy find their place in the grey zone that separates the language that destroys from the language that saves. The grey zone and not the interval. For nothing is less fixed than their border, and writers (poets, playwrights, novelists) and philosophers alike get lost on occasion when they in turn begin to serve violence. Both literature and philosophy, then, take place at the edge of the abyss, where it is never certain that the border between destruction and redemption definitively holds. No doubt, it would be vain to hold that the vocation of writing takes root, in each case, exclusively in the experience of violence. Philosophy itself ceaselessly invents initial impulses (wonder, doubt, enthusiasm) that refer to emotions entirely different from those incited by the spectacle, recognition, or test of violence. Literature, for its part, presupposes a play with language, an obsession of language, as well as a “possession” and a “dispossession” of names and syntax, of imperative voices, none of which necessarily implies a kernel of violence as the original experience.

Why does one write? To tell the truth, one could not respond to the question univocally or reductively by confining literature and philosophy to their confrontation with all the forms of destruction that comprise the framework for the fates of individuals and historical collectivities alike; nor could one respond by confining literature and philosophy to any other form of motivation or initial momentum. One could not, moreover, overload writing with the (ethical or political) responsibility of confronting the proliferation of murderous consents that marks our epoch. The vocation of literature and philosophy, which is always singular (and perhaps even one of the most irreducible forms of the invention of singularity), does not lend itself to or comply with any general injunction. Every reduction of this order would come down to postulating a vocation transparent to itself and, therefore, to denying or minimizing that which is precisely in question, namely, the infinite complexity of our relation to language and the unfathomable mystery of its history (the debts, inheritances, laws, transgressions, traumas, and madness that constitute it)—a history that is nothing more or less than the history of our own subjectivity.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that our confrontation with violence is an inevitable dimension of our experience of language and that its traces

have a stake in our intimate history, where the latter cannot be separated from collective history. The way literature and philosophy face the test of violence is thus not insignificant, accidental, or secondary. For neither of them does violence constitute an object, a subject for reflection, or one theme among others. For both deal with language in a given epoch and take responsibility, not without risk, for the possibility that, crushed under the weight of conventions and clichés and submitted to communication's imperatives for utmost efficiency and performance, words do not say (no longer say) anything of the singular, the possibility that they are thus cut off from their history and lose their meaning, if the sudden jolts and vicissitudes of politics do not reactivate them and reroute them for murderous ends first. The risk that they measure and that they cannot ignore is the risk of captivity (repeating others' language) and appropriation (dissolving into a community) in the illusion of a sovereign mastery of language and of the rights that it grants. The error is to believe that freedom is granted and that justice is assured at the very moment when the desire to grant rights, with and in language, to that which should make every word the invention of a singularity is eclipsed. This is what confronts literature and philosophy: the undeniable and irreducible fact that we are, in more than one way, *possessed* by languages that are not really ours and *threatened* by what this possession is capable of ordering. Family, school, the social milieu, community authorities, and powers of every order (religion, politics, the media) that frame existence impose *their* language. This is their ideological force—and no language (just as no culture) escapes it. Everywhere that there is *language*, the temptation of uniformity exists, a homogenization [*uniformisation*] that the educational and communication sciences henceforth take it upon themselves to control and to spread, in the very place where they claim to substitute for the practice of literary texts. The fantasy of a single language and thought is not only one of the most frequently recurring nightmares among those called forth by totalitarian fables such as those of Orwell, Zamyatin, or Bradbury; it is the specter that haunts every experience of language, as soon as it allows its law to be dictated.

Yet, that remains at the level of fantasy and fable. Even the most restrictive and compromising powers—those that will have rallied a majority of writers and philosophers to the various causes of their (political, social, religious, racial) violence—will never manage to bar completely and definitively the detoured path of a counterword, the perilous road of a resistant and alternative experience of language that some will have continued taking. Whatever literature and philosophy are, in different ways and by the very fact of their existence, they both challenge, against power's seductions and ruses, the passivity that would constitute accepting that language is inevitably doomed to serve violence without attempting to invent a

few lines of flight or opposition. At stake primarily in philosophy is its “critical” vocation. Because there is no exercise of violence that does not sooner or later draw upon lies, manipulated opinions, and hasty approximations, because there is no exercise of violence that does not play with words in order to turn them into a destructive weapon, care and “courage of truth”—which belong to the essence of critique—naturally trace critical lines of opposition, if only they escape the vertigo of force.

Literature, for its part, at least knows what could ruin it; it is threatened on all sides by an always possible submission to a foreign order and law that it suffers, even if willingly: the law of an authoritarian power, a Church, a party, a murderous cause, or even the market and its audience. The essence of the relation to language that literature puts to work is therefore the *power* to be subjected, perverted, and thereby destroyed. At times, this power occurs for the sake of the most murderous instances of violence, as so many compromised writers and misguided works exemplify throughout the twentieth century. Each time, the possibility of what I will call—through readings of Kafka, Celan, Kertész, and others in the chapters that follow—the “idiomatic” invention of singularity is irrevocably ruined. Every literary work worthy of the name comes from such an invention, and it implicitly or explicitly affirms, from the simple fact of its being, that such an invention is possible with and in language. This is the way violence concerns literature. Literature finds itself necessarily exposed to all the forces (which vary according to era, to regime and society, to family and tribe) that could or would compromise the lingual expression of this vital singularity and the no less vital sharing of it.

But neither philosophy nor literature is exclusive. And I will not maintain, in the pages that follow, the dreadful idea that writing (including images) would be our only way of confronting the constitutive violence of our experience of language, of becoming conscious of it, and of responding to it with a singular creation. For the demand to which philosophy and literature respond, through an address that does not know its addressees, in reality inhabits each relation that links us to others—all the links and attachments that carry in themselves the secret hope of escaping violence for as long as possible. Their promise inscribes them in a common history: ethics itself.

XI. Corpus

The chapters that follow all seek to grant rights to some of the singular inventions distinguished, throughout last century’s history, by their confrontation with the test of violence. They sketch out a trajectory and a constellation. The majority of the voices retained here—in particular

those of Kafka, Celan, Derrida, Levinas, Mandelstam, Klemperer, Singer, and Kertész—cross and (sometimes) respond to each other in a time and place punctuated by the lies, terror, and crimes of totalitarian systems. No doubt, they cannot be put on the same plane. Their different confrontations with violence (their ways of living and thinking it, of remembering it and bearing witness to it, the part it plays in “the vocation of their writing”) prevent one from putting them on the same plane. But they therefore join together—and this forms their constellation—to let us know that we are not alone when facing the test of violence (the experience and memory of it) as long as the *help* and the *consolation* of books, the gift of their writings, persist. Such is the part that each of them plays in the shared invention of writing’s own singularity, comparable to the poems that Celan describes as a bottle thrown out to sea and heading “[t]oward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality” (“Speech,” 35).